

Agartha's Castaway

Book 5

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

The glass floor allowed a view of the chiseled rocks a few hundred feet beneath her. Grabbing hold of the rail, Casey wavered. Any minute now, they'd be taking a ride on the glass sidewalk into the city of Agartha. Staring ahead at the cavern walls, she couldn't help but be suspicious of Orthon, but she and Mike had to take a chance with the weird guy they'd met only hours earlier. It was worth the risk though. They had no idea where they were, and they'd learned the hard way that wandering around in such a strange place could get them killed. *Finally, I'll be able to get my hands on a telephone, and tell my parents I didn't die in that storm at sea*, she thought, knowing they'd be so proud of her survival skills.

She wondered, though, if they would believe the tale she had to tell—that she was shipwrecked on an island in a prehistoric wildlife preserve and was rescued by a towering man with blond hair whom they presumed to be some kind of alien. She wondered what they would think of her if she told them Jack had been abducted by a UFO. She let out a sigh. It all sounded so crazy.

“How much longer until we take off?” Mike muttered in her ear.

She pressed her mouth tight as bats shrieked in the distance. Of course she wanted out of the cave, but joining Mike's complaint campaign wasn't going to help them one bit.

He stared down at the glass sidewalk and shook his head. “This alien technology is pretty cool...but are you sure it's safe?”

While plummeting to their death was a possibility, Jack's torture was a certainty according to Orthon. She glanced up at the unnaturally tall figure swaying forward in fluent motions, as if he didn't

really weigh at least twice her weight.

“Get ready and hold on tight,” said Orthon.

Inhaling, Casey grasped the glass railing tighter and took a step forward.

“I wonder if this moving sidewalk can go faster than the one at the airport,” said Mike behind her.

Casey slapped her forehead. “I don’t care, as long it gets us to our destination in one piece. But, yeah, since it’s called a *high-speed* skywalk, that should tell you something.” She didn’t mean to snap at him, but his constant questions and complaining didn’t work, at least not at that moment. Nausea rose up from the pit of her stomach. *What if those UFOs, hovering over the city, really belong to Orthon’s people? Can we trust this weird man we just met when he says those are enemy ships? Maybe Jack is better off up there than we are down here...*

Mike held up his hands in surrender. “Whoa! I can understand your frustration here. You’re dying for another one of my mind-blowing kisses, aren’t you? But there’s no need to be like that, babe. I’ll make sure there’s more of that to come in the future.”

“How reassuring, sweetie pie.” She blinked her eyelashes at him in a playful manner. “I’ll just forget about the alien taking us to his lair and focus on all those kisses coming my way.”

He laughed.

She opened her mouth to speak, when the glass conveyor belt thingy started to roll slowly, gradually increasing in speed.

A gust of wind hit her face as the ground rushed beneath her feet, moving at high speeds for miles underground. It reminded her of a New York subway—except it smelled better and seemed to be free of charge. Grasping the railing for dear life, she glanced around. The cavernous walls became a blur, except for a tiny dot of light approaching in the distance, growing larger by the second. As they neared the end of the tunnel, she gazed out and saw...*Daylight? Is that good or bad?* All Casey could think of at the moment was that people always see lights at the end of a tunnel during those near-death experiences she’d read and seen movies about. She knew she needed to get a grip because they weren’t dead—not yet anyway.

Still gliding through the air, Casey blinked at the sudden brightness flooding her vision. They were heading outside on a moving conveyor belt like the kind at airports. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the natural light. She brushed her hair behind her ears, but the wind blew it around again and again. The breeze carried the scent of desert herbs, sand, and sweet, dusty earth. She glanced up at the dazzling blue sky and felt sunshine on her face. Holding out her arms, she marveled at the speed and

cried, “We’re flying!”

Her heart raced as she peered down at the rock-strewn, desert landscape below. It was as if they’d landed on Mars, the red planet itself. Crimson-colored sandstone gorges and thousands of jutting spires ranging from sugar-white to deep orange shimmered in the glaring brightness. Little whirlwinds of dust, sand, and gritty dirt danced below. Fantastic rock formations, swirled with bands of colors, seemed to stretch out into endless depths like the Grand Canyon. She let out a giggle as she remembered her dad riding down the narrow path to the bottom. He had bounced up and down, hanging on for dear life, as his mule teetered precariously near the edge. He had sworn time and time again that he was going to fall straight over, thousands of feet.

The skywalk climbed even higher. Mike placed a hand on her shoulder, soothing the fear coursing through her. In a brazen moment, she gazed back at him. Yes, he was childish and spewed a never-ending fountain of lame jokes, and he was beyond obnoxious at times, but he was always there for her when she needed him. What more could a girl want?

“We are speeding midair on nothing but two inches of glass,” Orthon felt the need to inform them.

Two inches was as thin as Mike’s surfboard, and she wasn’t so thrilled to know that was all that separated them from those sharp rocks on the canyon floor, like giant teeth waiting to chew them up. She sucked in a deep breath and decided to get off at the next stop.

“What’s holding it up?” asked Mike.

Yeah, good question.

“We use magnetic technology,” said Orthon through the whipping wind.

“Magnets?” she asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Orthon. “There’s also an invisible force field around us for our safety.”

She spun, scanning the air for a glow or reflection—anything—because “invisible” anything didn’t exactly make her feel safe. “How do you know this thing’s working if it’s *invisible*?”

Orthon turned and shot them a mischievous glance, his eyes glinting as they whizzed along. From the look on his face, it didn’t seem like he was going to give Casey the answer she wanted to hear. “We do not know if it works, but we *hope*.”

Casey gulped.

“Just kidding!” he called back. “Of course it works. We do safety checks on a regular basis.”

Orthon was joking? Maybe he wasn’t uptight as she had previously thought. Breathing out, Casey relaxed a little. She’d no clue what sort of technology it was, because it was as alien as everything else

they'd seen in that place. Jack would probably have understood it a lot better than she would, but she couldn't understand why they'd make it transparent when they had to know that was going to terrify everyone. Black would've been much more soothing. "You're sure we won't fall out?" she asked.

Orthon nodded, his gaze already focused ahead.

Mike's hand settled on her shoulder, making her jump, and her hands grasped the rails even tighter. "Don't worry," Mike whispered in her ear. "I've got you."

Two strong arms wrapped around her waist, and for a moment, she felt safe and secure in Mike's embrace. She let go of the rails and threw her hands up. The cool wind felt good against her face, whipping against her skin like on her favorite rollercoaster. "I feel like a bird—like a soaring eagle!" she shouted.

"Whoa! Easy there. Don't take off without me."

She laughed; Mike had the best sense of humor. Her smile faded, though, as a rumble of thunder rolled across the sky. Startled, she blinked, fearing that a storm was blowing in. When Mike's jaw dropped and his carefree expression changed, she whirled around to follow his gaze.

"Uh, Casey . . . are you seeing what I'm seeing?" He pointed out over the colorful canyon, his eyes widening. "We got a flying reptile missile barreling straight toward us!"

She stiffened. The "missile" moved its pelican-shaped head from side to side, swinging its wings forward and backward in a vertical motion, like a giant vulture. Frowning, she gulped. There was no way it was any kind of normal vulture with that big, horn-like protrusion jutting from its head. Its piercing red eyes glowed while the creature glided on the air between flaps. She suddenly wondered if those sporty cars called Thunderbird got their name from that weird, menacing-looking creature. "Oh my gosh! It's the freaking pterodactyl thingy that flew over us earlier. It's making a jailbreak!"

"Hey, Orthon," yelled Mike, "are you aware the critters are breakin' out of your zoo?"

"Yes. The enemy shut down everything, including the electric shield to the prehistoric animal sanctuary. How do you think you and Casey were able to crawl out through the hole in the wall without being electrocuted?"

A shiver slid down Casey's spine. "So if we got through, that means other things are getting out—like anything that can fly over the wall or crawl through the hole? Although, we did jam a rock pretty good into that hole."

Orthon nodded. "With the shields down, it was bound to happen." Squinting, he peered into the distance. "Wave your hands! We need the creature to see us."

Mike shook his head. “What? So it can chomp us up in one single gulp? Are you freakin’ crazy?”

“It’s not after prey,” said Orthon. “It is only in flight, and if it sees us in time, it will fly above us to avoid a collision.”

Assuming Orthon knew more about the place and the wildlife there, Casey joined Mike and Orthon in waving her hands and shouting. It brought back memories of fending off the saber-tooth tiger. The living, breathing airplane flew closer, and Casey suddenly missed her shiny silver phone since it might have reflected enough light to get the flying lizard’s attention, but Jack had put it in his back pocket during the T-rex fiasco. *Darn my luck!* she thought, nowhere near the first or last time for the day.

Her mouth dropped. The steady rhythm of flapping wings echoed in her ears as it approached, letting out a shrill *Eeeeeeeeeeeee!* sound. She flailed wildly, but it refused to veer off course. “It’s going to run right into us!”

The creature’s eyes bulged as it met Casey’s terrified stare. Its long, robust beak opened, and she could see its pink tongue and rows of jagged, razor-sharp teeth that looked like they could take off an entire limb with just a nibble. The pterodactyl abruptly turned to the right, but it was too late. A sudden jolt shook her entire body as she clung to the railing. The monstrous flying lizard bounced off the force field and tumbled downward in a spiral motion.

Vibrations shot up Casey’s legs as the glass floor buckled, whirred, and shook beneath her feet. She staggered backward, almost losing her balance when Mike’s terrified scream rang out next to her. Glancing over to her side, she gasped. Mike was gone! Terrified that he’d fallen out, she spun around and gripped the railing, her heart thundering in her ears. She frantically yelled his name, but even though he didn’t answer, she was relieved to catch a glimpse of his bulging eyes. She’d never seen him so scared. He clung onto the bottom of the rail for dear life, his usually strong body flapping helplessly in the wind. She spun to face Orthon. “Do something!”

He knelt down and pushed a few buttons on the control panel by his feet. The high-speed skywalk slowly came to a halt, and they hovered in the air, like some kind of amusement park ride frozen in motion. Tiny flashes of light, followed by a flurry of sparks, made her jump. Finally, she could see the shield. She realized it would keep Mike safe from falling to his death, but at the same time, the crackling energy could electrocute him.

“Help!” Mike’s voice carried from below, sounding more helpless than Casey had ever heard him. “I don’t . . . I don’t want to die.”

“Mike!” yelled Casey. Her heart threatened to explode out of her chest. She peered over the edge,

but Orthon yanked her back.

“Don’t,” said Orthon.

“I’ve got to help him!” she shouted.

Orthon leaned over and grabbed Mike’s arm. He pulled up inch by inch until Mike’s blond head popped up.

“Casey, if I’m dying, I want you to find someone else,” wailed Mike. “Don’t wait until we meet in the afterlife. Just make sure the new guy’s not hotter than me. Otherwise, you might end up with a poltergeist.”

Sweat beaded her forehead as she knelt next to Orthon, trying to help. Mike let out a few more groans while Orthon grabbed Mike’s one arm and Casey clasped the other so they could heave him over the edge. Gasping for air, Mike lay on the floor, with his biggest fan cradling his head in her lap.

He looked up, relief washing over his features. “Thank you...both of you.”

“I’d never let anything happen to you,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I just saw my life flashing before my eyes, and then I realized I’m not ready to settle down yet. There’s so much more for a guy to do, like travel the world and turn pro in surfing.”

He had almost died, in some strange, alien place, and all he could think about was fortune and glory. She set her jaw, glaring at him. It wasn’t like she’d demanded a diamond ring from him already; all she wanted was more info about where they stood and whether they’d continue dating once they got home. She jumped up, knocking into his arm by accident.

“Ouch,” he muttered.

“Stand up. There’s still Jack to save.”

He stood, but he didn’t look too eager to move. “Honestly, after what I just went through, I think you should be reassuring me to make sure I don’t leave here scarred and with the shock of my life. So, where’s all my hugs and kisses?”

Boy, he was a drama queen, complete with emotions all over the place. One minute, it seemed as if he blamed her for possibly making him settle down, and the next, he was begging for hugs and kisses.

“Move it, Mike. I bet Jack isn’t so lucky to have someone like Orthon around to save him.”

“You got a point there.” Standing, he leaned forward and placed a peck on her cheek.

“Ready?” asked Orthon.

Mike nodded and glanced over the rail. “Wow! It’s like being stuck at the top of the Ferris wheel, only three times as high.”

The high-speed skywalk resumed, and Mike held his hands tightly around her waist from behind. Thoughts pounded her brain. *Is Jack being treated okay? Is he even alive? Will we be able to rescue him?* Tears welled up in her eyes as she pondered all the what-ifs, and she felt the pain deep down inside of her. She'd never give up on Jack—not ever—just as she knew Jack nor Mike would ever give up on her.

Straight ahead, a dark mountain loomed in the distance, and Casey's stomach fluttered at the sight of it. She hoped they wouldn't crash into it, though the glass sidewalk wasn't swerving to the left or right. She took a deep breath and peered around Orthon's large frame. When the sunlight glittered off a gold archway that was carved into the granite rock, like half of a giant, fancy McDonald's sign, she blew out a sigh of relief. It had to be an entrance into the city.

Holding in her breath, Casey felt her pulse speed up. It was the moment of truth, the moment they'd been waiting for. She hoped it would lead to a way to find Jack, but the way things were going, it could very well be some kind of disaster or trap.

A yell of excitement burst from Mike's mouth as they descended into the mouth of the cave. Daylight disappeared, and everything grew dim. The sidewalk seemed to slow down as they traveled through a winding tunnel of rock and finally emerged into a large white room with no windows.

"This is the control room underneath the city, where we monitor everything," explained Orthon like some kind of cosmic tour guide. When the glass sidewalk came to a sudden halt, Orthon unlatched the gate.

Jumping off, Casey scanned the humongous room. Bright light flooded the large space. As she glanced up at the ceiling, she saw no florescent fixtures and not even one light bulb, and she had to wonder if they were somehow witnessing the future of electricity. The walls and ceiling glistened like millions of crushed diamonds. Beyond two high pillars stretched the Command Center Orthon had mentioned, bustling with personnel, blinking panels, consoles, maps, and charts. In the middle, a contingent of people watched a giant screen—big as a billboard—on the far left wall. It changed images continually, displaying positions of the space ships above the city. As soon as someone pointed toward the visitors, the murmur died and heads started to turn.

Turning, she noticed the blonde woman to her right smiling hesitantly. The soldiers standing behind her, dressed in blue, military-style uniforms, didn't seem quite as welcoming. One said something in a language Casey didn't recognize, and the others nodded, a frown forming between their brows. It wasn't at all the warm greeting she expected. Taking several breaths to calm her racing heart,

she fixed her gaze on Orthon, who signaled one of the soldiers over.

“This has to be the mother of all control rooms,” said Mike, his voice filled with awe.

“Did you happen to notice something other than the gadgets and other cool stuff?” she whispered.

“Yeah. The people here are almost as cute as I am...but not quite,” he whispered back.

A tall man walked toward them. “*Wing su ti te ellmo ekdour,*” he said and held up a long syringe filled with a blue liquid. He tapped it a few times.

“Oh man. What’s Dr. Evil planning to do with that?” She grabbed Mike’s arm. Many scenarios had played out in her head, but she hadn’t even considered this one. She had come face to face with the stuff of nightmares and lived to tell the tale. She had even taken on a T-rex and its wild pack, only to be experimented on by an evil mad scientist with crazy white hair in a secret lab. Every old Frankenstein movie she’d ever seen flashed across her mind, and she wondered if she was going to find herself strapped down to a table, with batteries plugged into her head.

A shiver ran down her spine, and she shot Mike a glance. His eyes grew wide as he stared at the huge needle that he probably thought resembled a tranquilizer for the average elephant. Casey could tell by the look on his face that if she expected any support from him, she was badly mistaken. More than likely, he’d be the one needing a cuddle and someone holding his hand.

“What’s going on?” Mike demanded.

Casey’s mind raced as she stared at the syringe. “That needle’s big enough to put a horse to sleep.”

Orthon quirked an eyebrow at the approaching soldier. “*Henter so do aly tu si almot?*”

“*Te si umghe tumre sodo las tie que,*” said the man.

She wanted to tell them to speak English so she at least knew what she was in for and what that awful needle was for. Casey desperately tugged on Orthon’s sleeve, her fear mounting. “Orthon, don’t let him hurt us!”

Orthon reached for the needle and spun toward her. His face was expressionless, his manner calm. Gripping her shoulder, he said, “These orders come straight from General Ashtar. I’m sorry, but this might hurt a little.”

A horrified gasp broke from Mike. “Get away from us, or you’ll regret it.”

Confusion and shock overwhelmed Casey. She did not expect Orthon, who had gotten them out of danger so many times and led them there, to betray them in the end. “You’re just a backstabber!” She flung his arm off and took a long step backward, her voice trembling. “No frigging way are you sticking me with *that* thing.” Every cell in her body screamed for her to run, but she didn’t know where

she could run to. Her eyes darted all over the room, searching for an exit or some way to escape, but it seemed as if they were trapped.

“I thought you wanted us on your side!” yelled Mike, balling his hands into fists. “We never should’ve trusted you.”

If he decided to strike that needle out of Orthon’s hands, Casey wasn’t about to be in the way. In fact, she’d help him in any way she could. Her palms grew clammy, and her heart raced faster.

Orthon took another step forward, and he had backup in the form of five brawny-looking soldiers standing behind him.

Chapter 2

A yelp escaped Casey’s mouth; there was no way that long needle was going to pierce her skin without a fight. Somewhere behind her, Mike muttered something under his breath and grabbed her shoulders. She dared a peek before she returned her focus back to the syringe.

“You will feel only a small pinch,” said Orthon. “I promise.”

Casey knew all too well that anyone with a needle pointed at you always says that, whether it is a nurse, a doctor, or some mad scientist. She just couldn’t believe the man they’d trusted and followed all that time turned out to be one of them. “You first,” she said, meeting Orthon’s gaze head on. “Or, even better, why don’t you go wave that thing in someone else’s face . . . preferably far away!”

The soldiers behind Orthon scowled at her, and Orthon took another step forward. She thought if she got close enough, maybe she could kick it out of his hand with a Muay Thai kick, like the one she’d been teaching Mike earlier in the week. She wasn’t Bruce Lee and couldn’t take on an entire roomful of probably-aliens with her bare hands and a hairpin, but she thought she might be able to distract them for a second or two.

Shrugging, Orthon lowered the syringe, and she had to wonder if she had developed some kind of mental telepathy. If they really could read the thoughts of what she wanted to do to them, they’d be cowering on the ground in no time, fear bathing them in sweat.

“It is nothing but a communicator chip.” Orthon shifted his stance, the needle securely in his hands. “You will be able to understand any language from any world, and they will be able to understand you.”

Casey shook her head vehemently. *A communicator chip? To understand their language? Yeah, right. What a lame excuse.* She'd seen the movies and read the books. She knew they probably had some weird medical procedures in store, like taking out her brain and storing it in a large glass jar.

"Nah, I'm good," said Mike. "I'd rather get a cute girl to translate while I pretend I have to stare at her glossy lips to understand her weird pronunciation."

He didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. Dating or not, Mike sucked when it came to making Casey feel like she was the only girl in his life. "I guess, what our skirt-chasing friend here is trying to say, is that we don't trust you—not a single word that comes out of your mouth."

The lines in Orthon's face softened, and compassion flickered in his blue eyes. "You will have to trust me."

How naïve does he think we are? "No way! Just hand us a phone, post pigeons, or whatever you use for communicating with the outside world, and we'll be on our merry way."

"Not possible. You know I would help you if I could, but all of our communications have been shut down." His voice remained calm and reassuring, as though he was trying to regain their trust.

"Even the post pigeons?" Mike huffed. "Boy, that sucks."

Orthon knew Casey wanted to make a phone call, and he'd lured them to Agartha on false pretenses. Even though he hadn't promised them a phone, per se, he had failed to mention there was none. Casey realized it was her fault for not making a connection, so to speak, when he told her their communication was down, but he could have at least told her everything was down. Yet again, she felt betrayed.

Orthon took a step closer when she held up a hand to stall him. "Who says you call all the shots? I want to speak to this general of yours . . . and where do you plan on sticking that needle anyway?" She covered her buttock with her hands.

He rolled his eyes, and a tiny smirk formed on his lips. "Not where you are thinking. The procedure's simple. I inject the chip into your carotid artery, and it will feel no worse than a bee sting. I assure you it is completely safe."

Her mouth dropped. "Are you serious?"

Orthon's gaze narrowed. "Time is running out, for both us and your kidnapped friend."

She glared at him, angry. Of all the cards in his stacked deck, he didn't have to play the Jack. "Stay back! I'm warning you." Casey prepared herself mentally for whatever might come next. Her jaw clenched as her eyes focused on the syringe. Again, every karate move she'd ever learned whirled in

her mind. Orthon had heard them refuse, but he would not listen. She didn't really care to understand their language anyway, since she planned to be gone within a few hours. There was no need to endure a vampire bite from that nasty-looking needle. Besides, for all Casey knew, he could have been tricking them again. She shifted her stance and glared at the traitor. "You know English. Why can't you be our translator? It's not like we'll be staying here for long."

"That's what I'm screamin'," agreed Mike.

Orthon waved an impatient hand about, and two of the soldiers behind him stepped closer. He reached forward as if he was going to touch her arm, but he hesitated when he saw the grim look on her face. Holding out his palm he said, "It is okay to be scared, but our general has a plan to get Jack back, and you are part of it. A translator coming along is out of the question. You are doing this for Jack . . . to save his life."

"What? This is for Jack?" She peered at him intently, trying to catch in any hesitation or gesture that might give away his lie. When he just nodded and nothing stirred, she felt a wave of relief flooding through her. She wondered, though, why he just hadn't told them that in the first place. As much as she wanted to consider the communication chip, she couldn't switch off the nagging voice at the back of her head telling her to be more careful and less trusting. "I don't know. I still don't see the point."

Orthon waved the syringe in his hand. "Without this chip, you will never get close to Jack. Just how bad do you want to see him?"

Boy, he knew what strings to pull. A memory of Jack flashed through her mind, the sudden guilt choking her. Once, on a hike, Casey had broken her ankle. Jack had carried her back home for three long miles without a single complaint, like a true friend. She averted her gaze and remembered Jack's blue eyes and gleaming smile before her, his soft fingers brushing over her arm, his sweet voice comforting her through the pain.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, then opened them, more determined than ever before. She'd do anything to see him again. The silver needle glimmered in the glaring brightness, seeming just as scary as before. Pulling her hair back, she pointed to her neck. "Do it." Somewhere inside her mind, a voice screamed, asking her if she was crazy. Maybe the heat had gone to her brain, but she couldn't chicken out; Jack never had on her.

Mike gripped her arms and pulled her close. "No way! Why would you pull a crazy stunt like this?"

She glared. "Like you have room to talk. I'm doing it for Jack, which should be your priority too."

He let out a breath. “Do you have any idea what could be in that thing? We can’t trust these guys. You said so yourself.”

“I don’t care!” she shouted. “Listen to yourself, Mike. Your best friend needs help, and all you can do is stand there thinking of yourself.” She turned to Orthon. “Please do it before I change my mind.”

Orthon flicked the syringe with his forefinger and stepped forward, a frown perched between his brows. She held her breath as the needle connected with her skin, piercing the thin flesh on her neck. Her heart beat faster, prepared for the oncoming pain. It felt like she’d been injected with a stream of ice water: too cold, too unnatural. She grimaced, trying to not scream as she forced her legs to stay in place. A burning sensation crept through her body.

“You are done,” said Orthon handing the needle to a nearby soldier. “Mike?”

Casey had to wonder if she’d just made a huge mistake. She inhaled deeply, hoping there was no poison coursing through her veins. In the blink of an eye, the burning sensation dissipated, and she raised her palm to touch the puncture.

Orthon smiled.

“I’m alive.” Casey let out a sigh of relief, then laughed, peering over her shoulder at Mike’s pale face. She bet if she egged him on, he’d do it. “Maybe Orthon could offer you some Novocain? Perhaps some general anesthesia?”

“What? Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? I’m tough as nails.” He tilted his head to one side. “I just pray to God, Casey, that you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve no idea what I just did, but I hope it was the right choice.”

Mike shook his head. “You know that’s the wrong answer, right?”

She gently touched his hand. “Admit it, Mr. Big Stuff. You’re just scared.”

“No way!” His voice went up a notch. “I’m just trying to stay sane here. There’s no point in both of us being reckless. Hey, wait . . . shouldn’t I be the one taking the shot and you lecturing me? Oh no. I think I’ve turned into Jack.”

He was so bluffing, and she could smell it from a mile. Deep inside, she knew Mike felt the same way but just needed a bit of a nudge in the right direction. Even though she didn’t know whether she’d be suffering any side effects, she didn’t regret her choice. If something happened to Jack—she took the biggest breath ever—she couldn’t live with herself.

A soldier brought over a second needle and handed it to Orthon. Orthon stepped toward Mike, slowly pushing down on the plunger as he pierced Mike’s skin. From where she stood, Casey noticed

the tiny silver microchip floating in the blue liquid before it disappeared through the needle.

The same soldier quickly grabbed the used syringe from Orthon and walked away.

Mike staggered, holding his neck. “It feels like ice . . . wait . . . no, fire! Holy crap, this stuff burns!”

“Don’t be such a wus!” said Casey. “Besides, it stops hurting pretty quick.”

“If you say so. Haven’t they ever heard of common hospitality around here? Most people greet their guests with pies and cookies or maybe something to drink, not needles.”

A tall woman with a long blonde braid dangling over one shoulder motioned them to follow. Casey wanted more than anything to know where she was and what their intentions were. “Let’s go get some answers,” she said.

Taking the lead—as he was so good at doing—Mike marched forward, smiling like he was riding on a float in a parade. Casey was sure he’d start waving any minute.

The woman motioned to a white pillar. “Please wait here.” She touched their shoulders. “I know . . . tiny bit . . . English. Welcome to city.” She turned and walked away.

Agarthians from across the control room began to glance in their direction, with curious looks on their faces. Of course, Mike had to address them. “Hello, hello!” he called out. “My name’s Mike, and this is my friend Casey. Thank you for allowing us into your fabulous city.” He talked to them like five-year-olds or as if they were deaf; and they were neither.

She nudged him in the ribs. “They can hear you, you know. They just don’t speak our language.” She shook her head and pushed him forward, noticing how quiet the room suddenly seemed. She could’ve heard a hair dropping to the floor.

Mike had everyone’s attention, whether he wanted it or not. A room full of people stared at them like they were some three-headed cow at a carnival show. She swallowed hard, glancing from one open mouth to the other. “They’re gawking at me,” Casey whispered, “I stick out like a sore thumb. Everybody here is melanin challenged.”

“What?”

“They’re blond, Mike—all of them. And they’re gorgeous. I’m as rare as a two-horned unicorn. Heck, they’d probably be less shocked if I was one of those.”

“Maybe they’re staring because they recognize me from TV. I better get out my pen, because it’s going to be a madhouse once word gets out that I’m here. Remember what happened on the beach in Fiji?”

She remembered all right: tons of screaming girls, mostly American tourists, all over him like he was some big-time rock star. Heck, she couldn't even escape the fan club in Fiji. "I doubt they're staring because they want your autograph," she said. Only Mike could think a highly developed civilization with such high-tech equipment would halt in their busy observations because of his semi-famous name. He wasn't a household name yet, but ask any teenager who happened to watch MTV or any surfing fan and Mike's name earned instant recognition. As far as Casey could tell, there were no surf shops or beaches around, and everyone seemed to have more important things on their minds. Mike might have been keen on the attention, but she preferred to remain anonymous, to blend in. Lowering her gaze, she grasped Mike's hand, giving it a nervous squeeze.

"They're probably going to jump out and pour a bucket of bleach over your head," said Mike. "Don't worry. I'm blond, so I can safely say you won't automatically lose 100 IQ points."

A soft chatter resumed. Even though Casey couldn't understand a word, the warm smiles spoke for themselves: The people there weren't going to hurt them. She wondered, though, when the communicator chip was going to kick in—unless it wasn't really a chip for communication. She swallowed. *Oh crap! What did I get myself into? But if they are really so evil, why are they smiling?*

A military official with gold-braided epaulets on his shoulders stepped forward and called out. The three overlapping circles on his chest were gold, much larger than the others. On top of that, the three gold stripes on his left sleeve made her believe he was in charge.

Orthon approached him and started to talk in that strange guttural language of his. The other guy kept running a hand through his blond hair that fell in waves past the collar of his uniform, shaking his head every now and then. Orthon paused, throwing Casey a meaningful look, then continued in a softer tone.

Mike leaned in, whispering in her ear, "What're they talking about?"

She shushed him and inched closer to listen for any words that might sound familiar, but they were talking too fast.

"Did you hear that? I swear the guy just said the word 'food'," said Mike. "A big fat burger and fries? Maybe onion rings?"

She peered at his hopeful face. There they were, basically relying on an unknown civilization to save them, and all Mike could think about was finding a pen to sign autographs and devouring a big bag of fast food. "I've no idea, Mike. You're the one with the imagination. They could've said anything from 'food' to 'dude'. I just hope it wasn't 'shoot'."

Something clicked inside her temple, making her gasp. A sudden burst of heat rushed through her ears. When it stopped, she peered around, hesitant, wondering if the others felt it too. Tuning back in to the conversation, she noticed Orthon and the other guy speaking perfect English with a hint of a Swedish accent. “What the—?” Her fingers wandered to her neck. Orthon had been telling the truth: He really had injected them with a communicator chip.

“Preparations will begin immediately,” said the man in charge.

Casey could hardly contain her excitement. She tugged on Mike’s arm and laughed. “It works! It really works!”

His eyes sparkled as a grin spread across his face. “Yeah, mine just kicked in too. I understand them now.” He paused briefly and then continued, “You were right. It really was a communicator chip.”

Her grin widened. “Maybe you should listen to me more often.”

“Please inform General Ashtar that our guests have arrived,” said the man in charge. “I’ll keep them company until he gets here.”

Orthon nodded, then glanced at Casey and Jack. “See? I told you I would not hurt you.”

She shot him a weak smile, heat stinging her cheeks. “Sorry we were as nervous as scared, shaking Chihuahuas.”

“Yeah, but at least we didn’t leave a big puddle on the floor,” said Mike.

“Not a problem. While your fear was unfounded, I understand the issues involved with such a practice where you are from.” Orthon turned and pointed to the other guy. “This is Commander Gallant. He will be taking over for now.” And with that, he bowed slightly and turned on his heels to leave.

Casey’s fingers shook as she pointed to the screen. “Those ships took our friend Jack.” She shuddered as her mind replayed the awful moment when Jack vanished right before her eyes. Her tearful gaze met Commander Gallant’s. “We trusted you and took that awful shot. Now, can you please tell us about the plan to get Jack back?”

A shadow crossed Commander Gallant’s face. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend. Our general will be here shortly to explain how we’ll proceed.” He leaned in and touched her shoulder. “You have my promise that we will try to rescue him.”

“That’s great news!” Mike smiled and squeezed Casey’s hand.

The beautiful words gave Casey hope. A tear streamed down her cheek as her voice choked with emotion. “Thank you, sir. We can’t thank you enough.”

“A scout ship abducted your friend,” said Commander Gallant. “He’s probably on the mothership by now, along with all the other prisoners.”

Casey jerked her gaze up. “Wait . . . there’re more captives? On a huge mothership?”

The commander pointed upward. “Yes. It is currently hovering above Earth.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, wondering if things could possibly get any crazier. Jack was in *space prison. He must be scared to death.* She blew out a breath and scanned the room, her heart pounding. No one seemed to be in any sort of hurry. *Where the heck is the general? Sipping coffee with his feet propped up on a desk in some office?* She was anxious to hear their plan for rescuing Jack. Minutes felt like hours. She blinked her eyes open as Mike’s voice pierced through her thoughts, asking the question she’d been dying to find out since the moment she was shipwrecked.

“Where are we, exactly?”

The curiosity was slowly chewing her up from the inside out. She couldn’t go another moment without knowing. “Please just tell us.”

The commander shook his head. “I have no idea how you got here. Do you know what’s interesting? We named our city Agarthia because it means *inaccessible* or *unreachable*.”

“Maybe you should fire the guy who told you that,” said Casey.

“A few people seem to slip in anyway.” The commander’s stance stiffened as he paused. “It’s rare for surface-dwellers to find their way down here and even rarer for them to find their way through the prehistoric wildlife preserve . . . and survive.”

“Surface-dwellers?” *Are we in some kind of high-tech alien lair on our planet? Underground?*

“What does that mean?”

He stretched out his arm. “It means you have somehow managed to find your way to the center of Earth, to the ancient city of Agarthia. We’re a huge colony that broke off from Venus, the second planet from the sun.”

“Venus?” Casey bit her lip. How could anybody live on the hottest planet in the solar system? Her thoughts shifted. *Hmm . . . so they were a colony at one time? A colony broke off from England and settled in America, and this was apparently the same concept—only without *The Mayflower*. So how did these pilgrims ever get underground? She began to wonder who they had their first Thanksgiving with. *Prairie Dogs? Moles? Rabbits? Foxes?**

“We’ve lived here for centuries. This place is our home now,” said Commander Gallant.

Mike laughed.

The commander, however, didn't even smile; his mouth set in a firm line.

She shot Mike a glance, urging him to keep quiet, but as usual, he had other plans. "I knew you guys were a bunch of aliens all along."

"Oh man," said Casey. "I don't believe this is happening." It was like something right out of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, except they'd taken it a step further and met the aliens too. Still, though, it had all the key elements to make Jules Verne proud. But pretty much, it had all the key elements: Dinosaurs? Check. Giant cave? Check. Center of the Earth? Check. Then again, a few things didn't fit: Aliens? Negative. UFOs? Negative. A glass city? Negative. Kidnappings? Negative. *Leave it to me to veer off course not to Australia or New Zealand, but . . . inside of our lovely planet.* Or so they said.

Casey swallowed hard, the sudden mistrust nagging at her. They had to be aliens. Otherwise, there was no way they could have lived inside the Earth for hundreds of years. Then again, there was no logical way they could have survived there. Jack would attest to that. The temperature was simply too hot, and surely they'd all be burned into smithereens. "Umm... this isn't possible." She bit her bottom lip and started thinking about everything she had ever learned in science class. Boy, her teacher would have a field day with this joker. "The center of the Earth is molten lava." She grasped for the words. "The...uh, well, the Earth's divided into four layers—the inner core, outer core, mantle, and crust."

Commander Gallant smirked. "Perhaps you have been told wrong, young lady, for the truth is, you're inside a hollow sphere. The shell varies in thickness from 400 to 800 miles. Underneath the thick crust is a world that consists of vast continents, mountains, valleys, vegetation, and oceans, just like that of the surface. Just remember, to find the truth, you must first believe."

Casey pulled Mike to the side, whispering in his ear, "Is this wild or what? An unknown world inside of our world? What do you think about that?"

"Hmm. I'm thinking the Secret Service needs to know about this. It'd be a great place for the witness protection program."

She slugged him. "What? You really think they'd hide gangsters like Sammy the Bull down here? Get real."

"Okay, okay. I got off track. I think the commander's story is really out there and farfetched, yeah, but why would he lie? He has absolutely no reason."

She shrugged. "Unless he's a bad alien with ulterior motives."

Mike called over his shoulder, "Can you confirm you're not green?"

“Darn it, Mike, get real,” she hissed. “They don’t necessarily have to be green. They could be purple as well.”

Mike smirked and encircled an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

She took a deep breath, glancing up. “Are we really inside of Earth? Honestly, what are the odds?”

“Dunno, but here we are. Just think about it for a moment.”

Casey thought about everything she’d seen: amazing technology, dinosaurs, UFOs, and aliens, just to name a few. Before today, she would have labeled anyone who claimed to have witnessed even *one* of these amazing sights a complete and total nutcase. Yet, she’d seen it all with her very own eyes, and as far as she knew, she wasn’t crazy. It was all sinking in. She believed Commander Gallant, each and every word he said. *Holy cow! We’re inside the Earth!* She sucked in a breath and slowly let it out. She turned to Mike and said the only thing she could think of. “My cell phone never would’ve worked down here.”

“Not in a million years,” said Mike.

They burst out in laughter.

Chapter 3

Casey could hardly fathom that she was actually inside an alien city inside of the Earth. Mike squeezed her hand and shook his head in awe. She wanted to accept what they were telling her as truth, but she needed more answers. “If all communication channels had been severed, then nothing would come in or leave the walls, bubbles, or whatever these people had in place. So, how did—”

Mike’s voice jerked her out of her reverie as he said, “What about the ships we saw? How did they get inside?”

That’d been her thoughts exactly. She peered from the commander to Mike, then back to the commander.

“The rebels broke through our force fields at the North and South Poles,” said the commander.

Casey held up a hand, stopping him. “Whoa! Wait a second. People live there. They usually claim to see polar bears and seals, but UFOs? Don’t those tend to hover over Washington and military bases and trailer parks in the middle of the desert?”

“Aircraft come in and out of there all the time without surface dwellers suspecting a thing. The

entrance holes are 1,500 miles in diameter.” The commander regarded her with raised eyebrows, lingering on the last sentence like he’d just explained the sun, the moon, and the stars.

“Huh?” asked Mike.

Casey was glad she wasn’t the only dense one in the bunch. “Wouldn’t curious explorers see the gaping holes? ‘Cause let me tell you, 1,500 miles won’t exactly be mistaken for a rabbit hole.”

Commander Gallant clasped his hands behind his back, his lips twitching. “The holes are protected by an energy field and advanced illusionary technology. We get by your Star Wars satellite system with our cloaking devices. I am aware this is difficult to grasp.”

Casey took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Basically, he was saying the sky was full of flying saucers carrying little green men from Mars, and no one had ever noticed. “Difficult to grasp” couldn’t even begin to describe it. As much as she forced her logic into action, letting her mind take one step after another toward accepting it, that tiny inner voice inside her kept screaming that she should run for the nearest cab, plane, bus, or train—only there weren’t any around that she could see.

She began to think that maybe the sun had fried her brain. *Maybe I’m becoming delusional, schizophrenic, or borderline something*—anything as long as she didn’t have to believe what she was hearing. She thought she might wake up at any minute and discover it was all nothing but a figment of her imagination. Believing sucked, and it never came naturally to her. “In…” she started, then stopped to gather her words. “Incredible. This all seems like a dream.”

“That’s what I’m screamin’,” said Mike.

Casey shook her head. *If he doesn’t believe all this, how the heck am I supposed to?*

“It’s not a dream.” The commander waved his hand over his head, encompassing the ceiling. “We’re here, and we exist. There’s more than you think to what you presume to be the known universe. Take whatever you can imagine and multiply it by a million, and you might be getting close.”

Mike’s eyes widened, as if he was stunned beyond belief. “Wow.”

Casey’s eyebrows raised. “But what about everything we’ve been told by the media about UFO sightings and all those military experiments on aliens? Is it true?”

The commander hesitated, and he turned his eyes away from her for a moment. Then, his gaze locked back on her. “Obviously, there’s some truth to certain rumors, but not all of them.”

Mike’s forehead wrinkled as he seemed to ponder it. “Who would’ve thought? I was thrown off a boat and almost drowned. I can’t believe the worst thing that ever happened to me turned out to be the best thing that has ever happened in my life. I’m quite the explorer.”

“You’ve discovered a new civilization, something many would envy.” The commander tilted his head to the side, regarding him. “It must’ve been quite a shock to learn of our world following such a tragedy.”

Mike let out a long breath. “Well, I have to admit it’s quite a surprise.”

The commander snorted, amusement playing across his lips. “Certainly.”

A surprise? She gawked at him. *How can he call the tragedy we went through a surprise?* It was more like a kick in the gut. Standing there on that boat, with those ominous black clouds gathering in the distance, Casey knew something wasn’t right. The worst-case scenario she had imagined was being stuck in the hotel, maybe having to play darts or shoot pool with her dad in the game room, while Mike and Jack guffawed behind her back. Truth be told, a trip to the hollow Earth had really never crossed her mind.

This vacation offered more than its share of surprise elements. She didn’t mind adventurous vacations, but this one took the cake. Some questions still needed answers though. Mike wouldn’t care, but Jack would be mad at her if she didn’t take the opportunity to ask. As friendly as their hosts seemed, once they tired of their little Q&A session, she might not get another chance. “What about the water that changed colors?” Casey peered up at the commander, moving closer. “And the glittering sand? How do you explain those chiming flowers we saw?”

Mike stepped behind her and wrapped an arm around her middle, drawing her close.

“Yeah, dude. I gotta hear you explain that one,” he said.

“Over time, we’ve discovered ways to integrate our technology with nature. These landscape effects are created by superior sciences. I’m not at liberty to tell you anything other than that.”

Boy, Albert Einstein would flip. And what does the commander think I’m going to do? Steal his patent? “What about the two suns?” asked Casey.

“They’re artificial, but they provide light and heat. It is a giant quartz crystal, tightly compressed to release the energy within the matrix. We then hold the compressed crystal with a strong electromagnetic field. It’s a long, complicated process, but essentially, it creates a sun that will burn for us for hundreds of years. It gets dim at night, just like on the surface. Other subterranean cities have their own, using the same compressed crystal technology.”

“Wow! Amazing stuff,” whispered Casey. “Wait...did you say *other* subterranean cities? How many are there?”

Mike held up his hand, stopping her. “Better question, where are they? If there’s someone living

under Huntington Beach, tapping into my bath water and cable TV, I have a right to know. Hey, that'd certainly explain all that lag on my Facebook. Is somebody watching YouTube with my Wi-Fi underneath my house?"

"They're scattered deep under the Earth, part of a civilization we've kept secret for thousands of years," said Commander Gallant.

"That's great, isn't it, Casey?" Mike made the high-five sign. When he noticed she didn't return it, he continued, "Aren't new cultures and civilizations cool?"

"Sure, as long as it includes a four-star hotel and a return ticket," added Casey.

"I know you came here through some unfortunate accident..." The commander stopped briefly before he went on, "...but you ended up in forbidden territory. How could we possibly let you return to the surface after all you have witnessed here? As I said, we've managed to keep this a secret for thousands of years, and we need to keep it that way."

Casey froze to the spot, her mind working overtime. "Whoa! What're you saying? What're you going to do with us? We can't stay here. It's not where we belong."

The commander raised a brow. "If we somehow survive this crisis we're in, we'll have to relocate you to another planet in our solar system. It won't be very different from the life you've led so far."

"What did you just say? You're not letting us go home?" Mike's voice boomed through the suddenly silent room. A tomb would have been more lively. "Don't tell us it wouldn't be much different! We're not leaving our family, friends, and old lives behind. That's just not going to happen. You can't keep us here like prisoners. A one-way ticket to Glassville? Not happening! Not even chained to a tree or thrown into a dungeon with metal doors or—"

"He's not telling us they'll keep us *here*." Casey's heart leapt in her throat. "They're sending us somewhere else." As far as she was concerned, the bad guys up there could beam her right up, because hatching eggs in the back of her head was better than spending her life on another planet, without ever having the chance to go home. Astronauts might be okay with freeze-dried ice cream in foil packs, but Casey was in dire need of a home-cooked meal from her mother's kitchen.

"I'm afraid we don't have a choice," said the commander, almost silently.

Tears welled up in Casey's eyes. Coming to the city of Agartha was a giant mistake. She'd known it all along, but Mike and Jack wouldn't listen. If they ever got out of there, she'd remind them for the rest of their lives.

Mike's mouth dropped. "So where are you planning on taking us?"

Casey took a deep breath, trying to relieve the anger that was quickly rising inside her like a volcano, waiting to erupt. Being separated from her loved ones wasn't an option. "Don't even consider Venus, because I'm not into watching eggs and bacon fry on the sidewalk, only to turn into some cosmic exploding omelet when the temperature reaches 450 degrees. And Neptune?" She shook her head. "No way. I'm not into dressing like an Eskimo when it dips to minus 300—I don't look good in fur." After all, big, bulky coats added plenty of bulk, only not in the right places.

"Considering the circumstances, a relocation will be the best for everyone," said Commander Gallant. "People from this galaxy aren't so different. We all attend sporting events, social gatherings, and plays. We watch movies. We also love art, music, and dance."

She rubbed her hands over her eyes to get rid of the stinging sensation. She wasn't usually a crybaby, so she wasn't about to give them the satisfaction of thinking they'd defeated her. As long as she could still plot an escape, they hadn't won a thing. She only hoped Mike wouldn't blab and give all their plans away. "Somehow I can't picture you watching movies while guzzling soda and polishing off a bucket of popcorn. This isn't my thing, and I don't want any part of it. My mom and dad won't even be with me! What kind of life is that?"

Mike's grip around her tightened as he spoke. "Listen, Commander Gallant. We're not part of your world. You don't have the right to decide over our fate. And how can you expect us to believe there's life on other planets?"

A small smile softened the commander's face. "Our entire universe *is* teeming with intelligent life and other civilizations."

"Really?" asked Mike. "What do they look like? If they come with two horns, seven noses, and a slimy tail, I'm sorry to tell you they aren't gonna be my type. I'd rather be the pretty boy than the odd one out. I don't mind people staring, as long as it's for the right reasons—and I don't need them staring at me with six eyes."

Commander Gallant leaned forward with an earnest look on his face. "We'd keep you in the same galaxy, our Milky Way. You can learn amazing things your own scientists don't even know about."

Turning toward Casey, Mike whispered, "Is it just me, or is he avoiding a straight answer? I don't want to know whether they can give Einstein a run for his money. All I want to know is what they look like. Are they freaky looking or super gorgeous like these people?"

Poor Mike. To think, there might be a place where he isn't the handsome beau. This might truly be his biggest nightmare. Still, she couldn't help but feel frustrated with him. She needed to get him to

focus on the things that really mattered. The guy just told them they couldn't ever go home.

Life throughout the universe? Normally, learning about such an amazing thing would blow Casey's mind. Now, however, it hardly registered. She wanted her mom and dad, and Commander Gallant had just told her she'd never see them again. That kick-started a stubbornness in her, and she suddenly had every intention of proving them wrong. "I'll pass. Thanks for thinking of me though."

"You don't understand. We're giving you an opportunity to see the universe. No surface human has ever had such a unique and wondrous opportunity." Commander Gallant let out a huff, as if he was frustrated that she wasn't honored to be given such a privilege.

Even if it was like a hitchhiker's trip through the galaxy, she still had no interest in any plan that didn't include sending her home. "I'd rather not jump on the loony wagon. I like my oxygen without a mask, and I need to occasionally sink my teeth into a Hershey bar, thanks."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not saying it wouldn't be amazing, but at what price? You want to take us away from everything we know and love. It's not worth it!"

Casey scoffed at the commander. "I'm not doing anything until we get Jack back. After that, I'm going home...and by home I mean back to the surface, where I belong."

He straightened his broad shoulders, peering at her through those blue eyes that seemed to pierce her very core, making her shiver. "As I said, we don't have a choice. You will have to come with us once you've fulfilled your duties."

She glared at him. "So you're abducting us? How is that any different from what the aliens did to Jack? You're as awful as they are!"

His eyes showed compassion and concern as he tried to weave them into his wicked web. "We're offering you a chance to live. This friend of yours, this Jack, will not be so lucky. Eventually, they will put an end to him."

"That's not happening, so don't even go there." Casey snorted. "And besides, you're not offering us a chance to live. You're trying to control *how* we live. Go figure. Control's control, whichever way you take it."

"Whoa, wait a sec." Mike held up a hand to silence her. "Let's rewind a few minutes, shall we? What did you just say about *duties*?"

The commander nodded. "You want your friend saved, correct? We will make every attempt to assist you with that goal, but you must do something for us in return. I'm not at liberty to say what that is, but General Ashtar will inform you of the details."

Casey threw him her best fake smile. “There’s always a catch.”

“That’s the way it is,” he said.

A shudder ran down her spine. *What if the Agarthians force us to get alien IDs, and settle on Jupiter after we do this stupid favor for them?* The thought of never seeing her parents again—of never seeing her house, her friends, her school, her world—made her nauseous. Worse, her mom and dad would spend the rest of their lives thinking their daughter had drowned in the ocean. She set her jaw, thinking. Mike was right. She wasn’t about to do anything for people who were going to force her to lead a life she never envisioned for herself. But unlike Mike, she saw an advantage in pretending to cooperate, then making a beeline for the exit as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Of course, she could also try to strike a deal with them. She folded her arms over her chest. “Getting shipwrecked down here wasn’t our fault. We didn’t choose any of this. You can’t take us away from our lives because of something we had no control over. If you want something from us, then just spit it out. We’ve no time for games.”

Her head jerked up as two swinging doors opened, and another blond-headed, pale-skinned man emerged. His hair was slicked back in such a precise style that she could have measured the distance between the strands with a ruler. Anyone sitting rose to their feet and snapped to attention. Excited voices, cheering, and clapping erupted.

The commander bowed deeply and then pointed to Casey and Mike. “General, these are the surface children.” Nodding at Casey, he said, “And this is General Ashtar, our highest-ranking official.”

So it was the big boss himself. Casey peered at the immaculately ironed uniform and countless insignia. If anyone had the power to send them home, it would clearly be him. She plastered a fake smile across her lips and opened her mouth to speak, but as usual, Mike beat her to it.

‘I’m Mike, famous professional sportsman and champion of the surfing world. I’ve been in countless magazines, even on the covers. You name ‘em, I’ve been on them.’ Boy, he was laying it on thick! “In fact, I’m so famous that I’m sure the White House is gonna come looking for us soon. This place will be invaded by huge helicopters and the CIA, FBI, Delta Force, SWAT teams, Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Secret Service, and Chuck Norris, and CNN in no time. And trust me, you don’t want that.”

General Ashtar’s face grew solemn, his towering frame looming over them. “Son, I know you will tell people about your discovery if you were ever to return home.”

He was a bright one, but she could defuse the situation. Casey opened her mouth, but Mike cut her

off again. “How do you know that?” he asked, his voice rising in pitch.

Why can't he just keep his trap shut for one minute?

“I’m sorry, but I read your thoughts. It’s something I’m generally against and never do, but I had to make an exception to see if your heart is genuine and true. Our lives depend on it.”

Casey’s eyes widened. *These people read minds?* She knew she had to find a way to protect her thoughts; otherwise, her plans would be flushed down the drain as soon as the guy took soul searching a little too seriously and decided to pay her subconscious a visit.

“You have no reason to be afraid.” General Ashtar spoke with a calm and gentle voice. “It’s simply another mode of communication that we possess. Do not worry, for my people won’t read your mind without my permission, and that includes Orthon. Your thoughts are yours and yours alone, and they were safe on your journey here.”

She nodded, glad to hear it, especially since they’d cracked so many jokes about poor Orthon, debating whether he was a robot, human, or alien.

The general’s sapphire eyes glittered in the light, and he grinned, putting his hand on Mike’s shoulder. “Your legacy won’t be finding this place. *It’ll be saving it.*”

He was a smooth talker, and Casey almost fell for it. They were surrounded by men standing six feet tall, with strong, lean bodies and probably brave spirits. Any one of them could pass for Superman. For the life of her, she couldn’t fathom what a five-foot-something kid could do that their army of super-beings could not.

“Yeah, we’ve heard there’s something you’d like us to do, but save this place?” She laughed and shook her head. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re not trained military soldiers. We’re just kids. What help could we offer, apart from teaching you a thing or two about how to be cool and survive the hardships of high school?” They were definitely up to something, and Plan A was sounding about right: Get Jack and then find a way out of that nut house.

“I understand your reluctance, but let me explain.” General Ashtar smiled. “First, I welcome you to Agartha, a paradise in the middle of the Earth. As you can see, our technology is far advanced beyond that on the surface, about 5,000 years, to be specific.”

Yeah, I got that part loud and clear. If I moved into the city and bird poop lands on my glass house, I can hop into my UFO, put my baby raptor and brontosaurus in the backseat, and rush to the market to get some space-age Windex. Heck, maybe I can even buy a bouquet of musical flowers while I’m out.

The general continued, “Our royal family, elders, children, and most of our women evacuated

before the enemy shut everything down, so I'm in charge for the time being." He took a step forward. "We're all in great danger and need your help. Commander Gallant told you that you cannot go home, but I have the authority to save Jack, make a deal, and return you to the surface."

Finally, somebody was making sense in all that craziness. Casey let out a sigh of relief. Jack would be rescued, and she'd see her parents once again. Still, while it seemed she didn't need an escape plan after all, she decided it wasn't wise to give up on it as of yet. As much as she wanted to trust him, she couldn't risk it. If he proved trustworthy, she'd just send him an I'm-sorry card later; *No, make that an e-card so he'll never get my home address, just in case they change their mind.*

Commander Gallant leaned in. "Sir, they can't keep a secret of this magnitude."

Casey's head felt like it was going to explode, and she wondered what Gallant's problem was. She wanted to scream at him that she'd never say a word about the place, as long as they'd let her go home. As far as she was concerned, she wished she'd never laid eyes on their precious city. "We promise not to ever say a word about Agartha."

Smiling, General Ashtar waved his hand. "Don't worry. In their world, they'd be dismissed as crackpots, telling such a tale."

That was true, but she wasn't about to become the laughingstock of California—or the world, for that matter. The trick was keeping her mouth quiet, and she decided she'd sew Mike's blabbermouth shut if she had to.

Hard angles dominated General Ashtar's face as he met the commander's gaze. "I'll be taking over now."

Commander Gallant bowed. "Yes, sir."

Mike pulled Casey's hand as he moved closer to General Ashtar. "Listen, we swear that our lips are sealed. So you'll really let us go home?"

The general's eyes crinkled with laughter. "Yes. You have my word on that, as long as you save Jack and our world in the process."

Casey gulped, wondering why she was getting the feeling that she was drawing the shorter end of the stick.

Chapter 4

She didn't understand how such an advanced civilization, with all their fancy powers and gadgets, could possibly need any help from her or Mike. Casey pulled Mike aside, calling over her shoulder, "Just a minute, if you don't mind."

The general raised his brows but didn't comment.

"I think this is a case of mistaken identity," whispered Casey.

Mike regarded her intently. "They think we're somebody else?"

She shrugged. "What else could it be? Let's face it, we're no superheroes. As far as I know, surfing isn't some superpower, as much as you'd like to think so. We don't even have Jack around. At least he has dictionary and encyclopedia brain."

"Why don't we just wait until they brief us? You never know what they—"

"Look, Mike, I'm not getting involved with a bunch of people who think we're some kind of action heroes."

She rolled her eyes when he pulled her closer and said, "C'mon on! It's time to face the blondies again and see what they have to say. I'm sure everything will be okay. Besides, unless you know how to call a cab from here, I don't see that we have any other choice."

Casey shook her head and returned to the general, hoping Mike was right.

"Let me get straight to the point then." General Ashtar's chest puffed out. "Alien rebels possess a powerful nuclear weapon. It's housed on their mothership and will be aimed at the surface of Earth shortly. By eight a.m. tomorrow morning, that weapon will vaporize every living creature on—and in—the planet." His gaze settled on Casey. "That means everyone in our world, and yours."

Casey's heart jumped into her throat. "Oh man!" Closing her eyes, she turned away as shock engulfed her. She thought she'd reached her limit after Jack went missing and when she was told the Earth was hollow. Then came the news about the aliens and UFOs. Orthon had mentioned something about annihilation. But a weapon that'd turn all life into dust by the next morning, even before she ate her regular bowl of cereal? She wanted to scream. Streaks of sweat ran down her spine, drenching her shirt. Her throat felt coarse and dry as she whispered, "I can't believe they really want us dead."

General Ashtar's jaw tightened. "There's no point in sugarcoating the situation. We're facing a true disaster, and it's only right you know the details."

"Great. Now I'll have nightmares for weeks." Mike's hands trembled behind his back. He tried to underplay it by using humor, but Casey knew he was scared to death. His eyes widened. "But you have a plan to stop them, right? You know, some trick up your sleeve that shows the little green men who the

real masters of the universe are?”

General Ashtar nodded.

“Hurting innocent people isn’t going to solve their problems,” said Casey.

“I agree that violence isn’t the answer. I don’t think they’ll be quite so willing to listen to your proposition, because they have their own agenda in which we have no role to play,” the general continued. “Once they annihilate the human race, they’ll establish a base on North America with the goal of overtaking every city across the globe and within it.” He motioned them to follow him to an instrument panel and monitor, where he pointed at several black dots on a map. “They’ve interfered with our communication systems to the point that we can no longer contact planets outside of Earth for assistance.”

Casey’s heart sank in her chest, and a numb feeling invaded her body. “So, in other words, they made sure no one would see the bloodbath until it was too late.”

General Ashtar folded his hands behind his back once more and rocked on his heels. “Since our defense depends on our communication mechanisms, our weapons have been disabled too. So has every single ship in our hangars.”

Mike sucked in a deep breath and whispered to Casey, “We’re screwed. No weapons. No ships. No communication.”

She was surprised that for once, he sounded like the pessimist. Her attention shifted back to the general. “What plan could you possibly have? And how does it involve us?”

“Our plan is to use the only operational ship...the alien one that crashed near Agartha yesterday.” General Ashtar casually observed her expression.

Her jaw dropped, and all she could do was stare back at him, with a blank look on her face.

Mike’s eyes widened as he glanced around the room. “The UFO? Where?”

“It’s housed in a bunker so we can study it and then retrofit it for our use.” General Ashtar crossed his arms and rubbed his chin. “Our highest-ranking military technicians have been working with top scientists. They’ve come up with a plan that could easily turn the tide on the rebel Greys.” His gaze wandered from Mike to Casey and then back to Mike. “That’s where the both of you come in.” He paused, as if thinking of the best way to explain it.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Mike. “Please cut to the chase already.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. She never would have guessed his pushy, ill-mannered nature that so often irritated the heck out of her would one day come in handy. She opened her mouth to speak, but

the general cut her off.

“As you wish. Our experts have developed a microchip that will transmit a virus, which will render all of the Grey weaponry circuits unusable. It will solve everything. Our only problem is that we need someone to deliver it.”

“Hmm. So why don’t you have somebody dress up in a pizza delivery outfit and take it up there like a stuffed-crust meat lover’s or something? I don’t care what galaxy we’re in, I don’t think anybody can turn down a free pizza.” Mike winked at Casey, who’d been thinking something quite similar herself.

“Delivery is only the beginning. It has to be activated and placed directly into the weapon in order to work,” said General Ashtar.

“Hmm. Well, better yet,” said Mike, “why not just send flowers, wired with a bomb? You could send them a musical bouquet.”

“I’m sure they would have thought of that already if it would really work, Mike.” Casey slapped his hand gently. “Remember, Jack’s up there too. Unless he can find a way out of there, blowing up the mothership isn’t an option.”

The general nodded. “Destroying the mothership would be an excellent strategic move, but the third pilot refuses to help us unless we promise no violence whatsoever. Without him, we can’t operate the alien ship and follow through with our plan. Therefore, we’re forced to abide by his wishes.”

Mike shook his head. “What? This pilot has some moral opposition to taking out a ship full of homicidal aliens who want to kill billions of people and make us as extinct as those dinosaurs were supposed to be?”

“He has his reasons, but they are personal, and I am not at liberty to discuss them,” said General Ashtar. “Our plan, therefore, is to have someone board the craft, find the weapon, trigger the timer, and insert the chip.”

“You want us to march right in there? I’m not sure they’ll be so happy to see us.” She fidgeted with her hands. She was sure now that he wasn’t the nutcase she made him out to be; he was too smart. He just kept talking without giving away any information, trying to stall them and using his propaganda to brainwash them.

“That’s the only way,” he continued, “and timing is critical because there’s only a thirty-second window between the time we activate the chip and the time it must be placed within the alien weapons chamber.” He paused, releasing a breath through pursed lips.

“You’re kidding,” Mike mumbled. “How’re we even supposed to get up there when you said your ships, camels, or whatever you’re using aren’t working?”

“That’s a valid question.” The general tapped a finger on his chin, considering his answer carefully. “Since none of our aircrafts are operational, we are forced to use the only available ship.”

“The *U.S.S. Alien* that you’re keeping in the bunker?” said Casey, slapping her forehead.

The general nodded again. “Unfortunately, the Greys are smaller than we are, so none of our pilots fit in the operation seats in the cockpit.”

“How much smaller?” Mike pointed from himself to Casey, his green eyes widening. “Are you talking our size?”

“Yes.”

Mike’s green eyes grew wide, and his jaw dropped. “So you’re telling us you need a pilot? Well look no further! I’m your man.”

“But...” Casey swallowed hard as realization kicked in. “But, sir, we aren’t pilots. Heck, Mike can’t even drive his bicycle without running over a few old ladies and their little dogs.”

Mike heaved a sigh. “That was one time, Casey, and it was only because it was Jack’s bicycle and I wasn’t used to it.”

She waved her hand. “Whatever. Point is, I don’t get it. You have all this awesome technology. Can’t you just grab a futuristic chainsaw and make the seats bigger for your own people?”

The general shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s not that easy. We’ve tried everything at our disposal, but the chairs were installed with some type of technology we cannot change or decipher.”

“Why don’t you just rip the seats apart and put in your own, then glue it all to the floor...with seatbelts, of course.” She crossed her arms over her chest. The whole thing sounded ridiculous, as if they refused to even try.

His intense gaze fixed on her face. “The pilot seats cannot be tinkered with or removed without serious consequences. One of my men is fighting for his life because he tried to remove the seats and was promptly and violently electrocuted.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” She stared at him, images of burned bodies flooding her mind. She was in no mood to show up as “fried” on Colonel Sanders’s menu. “How do we know the same thing won’t happen to us? The chairs could have some weird recognition software that knows when the wrong pilot is sitting there. I’m not a fan of being barbecued, hero mission or not.”

The general inclined his head, thinking. “Not likely, according to our third pilot. I wish we could

get more info from him, but he only knows how to fly the ships.” It didn’t seem to be enough of an answer to satisfy Casey’s scowl, so he continued, “As I said, this technology is new to us and very sophisticated. It may take a little longer to decipher it.”

“I have an idea,” Mike blurted out. “Forget the seats. Can’t you just stand and operate the ship? You know, like a Wii or something? Or are you guys still playing Atari? I mean, you do still have dinosaurs.”

General Ashtar turned to face him. “We tried standing. The ship engines won’t even start without a precise weight requirement and three heartbeats in place.”

Mike slapped his forehead.

Casey was baffled. If their experts couldn’t figure out the weird technology and get past the security precautions she wondered how the heck the general expected them to fly the thing. After all, it wasn’t like they offered Aerodynamics Flight 101 at her high school, and E.T. wasn’t exactly hanging out in the teachers’ lounge. “What’s this weight requirement all about? Because if you ask me to step on a scale, I’ll insist on a soundproof bathroom with no mirrors or windows through which others might pry. And you’ll have to pinky swear absolute secrecy.”

“I will tell you how the security precaution works. All three seats must be occupied. There must be three beating hearts, and the pilots must have a combined weight of no more than 400 pounds. Thorn, the third pilot, weighs less than 100 pounds.” The general looked at Mike, then Casey. “The two of you appear to have a combined weight of under 300 pounds.”

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks. If Mike weighed 200, she was doomed. She had to wonder if this whole thing was some kind of joke, or maybe a nightmare spawned by her own self-consciousness. One look at the general’s face told her he was dead serious. She inched toward Mike, whispering, “I told you to cut down on the cheese fries.”

He chuckled and then said to the general, “So why don’t you rig the chairs? Throw down 300 pounds of bricks and a couple of monkeys, and bingo! You’ve got the weight and the beating hearts.”

“We’ve tried tricking the system. The technology is so advanced that it is capable of detecting inanimate weight and animal heartbeats in less than twenty seconds.”

“Maybe it would be better to fix one of your own ships,” said Casey.

Mike nodded his head in agreement.

“Not only have they shut down all communication, but they’ve inserted some type of virus into all of our ship computers.” General Ashtar waved a hand. “Our entire fleet has been rendered inoperable

by the enemy. Even if we could fix the problem, their patrolling army would destroy us even before we exited Earth's atmosphere. If we use one of their vessels, we will be able to approach the mothership without incident, deliver the virus, and escape before they realize what's happened."

It sounded like a good plan, commandeering an enemy ship to sneak in, like Han sneaking onto the Endor moon. Still, though, Casey wasn't all that enthused. Maybe that was because they were just kids. She had the technical savvy of a cat, and Mike wasn't much better. In fact, he was worse, because once his excitement took over, he was like a five-year-old in a candy shop—eager to touch everything that glittered and sparkled.

"This is *so* like *Independence Day*," said Mike.

Nudging him, Casey rolled her eyes. "No, it's different. Will Smith's like the pizza delivery guy. He drops the pizza off and speeds out of the driveway. But not us. We're *boarding* the mothership. That's like driving to the pizza shop and going inside."

"As long as they play my favorite songs on the jukebox, bring it on." Mike grinned and put an arm around her shoulder and noticed how serious she looked. "Hey, Casey, I'm just kidding. Besides, if Will Smith can jump into an alien spacecraft and learn to fly it in a few minutes, so can we."

"You know Will Smith is an actor, right?" she said. "It was all in the script, totally unrealistic. This isn't the movies, Mike. We're talking about real life."

"Really? And here I thought I was dreaming, what with all those dinos and all this alien talk." Mike laughed. "Relax. Like I said, I'm just kidding. Don't worry. I'll learn to fly this thing in a heartbeat."

And that was exactly what worried her—that he'd skip through the instructions because he felt it all came natural to him.

Mike rubbed her bare arm, sending shudders down her spine as he leaned in to whisper, "We'll do it together, like Caesar and Cleopatra."

Gripping his hand, she tried to smile. She couldn't even control a motor vehicle, let alone fly a spacecraft. In Driver's Ed, she and Mike had moved at a snail's pace and still knocked down most of the orange cones. Jack drove faster, but even he mowed over his fair share too. Frowning, she looked at Mike and then at General Ashtar. "But I told you already, we're not pilots. We may look clever to you, but we suck at technology. You couldn't trust Mike with a hairdryer, and I'm even worse. Most of the time, I can't even get my alarm clock to work. Sir, there's absolutely no way we can do this."

"You can be trained." His eyes flickered for just a moment, like he was nervous.

“In less than twelve hours?” Casey still had her doubts. Setting up her computer and putting numbers in her cell phone was about the extent of her technological background.

The general smiled. “My good friend Thorn will be in the cockpit with you. He is a talented pilot and can tell you anything you need to know. He can pretty much operate the ship himself. We need you because security must pick up three heartbeats with the right weight requirements sitting in the chairs. And of course, we need you to sneak aboard the ship and activate the microchip.”

In the end, it was a little different from *Independence Day* since they’d have the luxury of an experienced copilot who knew how to fly this ship. That, at least, was a step in the right direction. Still, she sighed and peered at the general, wondering how the crazy plan was going to stand a chance. *How can he expect us—two kids—to pilot an alien craft into space, board a mothership, and walk amongst rebel Greys to deliver a microchip into a weapon of mass destruction?* The closest thing she’d had to training was all the sci-fi she’d watched. *I guess Luke was only about eighteen—not much older than me—and he destroyed the Death Star.* But then again, Casey didn’t have Yoda or the force on her side. “I want to help, but this is so out of our league.” Casey placed a hand over her racing heart, trying to calm down, but her pulse wouldn’t slow. “How can you expect us to go on some military expedition into unknown territory? I’m not even old enough to join the army, for goodness sake.”

“And another thing,” Mike chimed in, “what if we go in there and someone sees us?”

The general shrugged. “Then you shoot.”

Casey laughed. “Are you serious?” It was like a general handing her some army fatigues, binoculars, and a machine gun and saying, “*Go get ‘em, tiger.*” She had never held a weapon in her life, and she had no idea what she’d do if she had to shoot at something—or worse, *somebody*. The thought terrified her. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think we can help you.”

General Ashtar cocked an eyebrow. “Did I fail to mention it’s the very same mothership that is holding Jack prisoner? Not only can you save everyone on Earth, but you can rescue your friend in the process if you will do this for us.”

She’d figured that out already. Jack was the only reason she’d ever consider something so absolutely insane. Casey took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Why do I have this nagging voice in the back of my head telling me there’s more to this story?”

“Maybe that’s what they injected us with,” said Mike.

She shook her head. “No, it’s just my gut feeling telling me to run, to get as far away from here as I can, or I might not be able to later.”

General Ashtar turned on his heels and motioned them to follow. “Come. We haven’t a moment to waste. I’ll brief you on the rest as we make our way to the spacecraft.”

“So we’ll help you fly the ship, storm in with a huge army, find that weapon, and help Jack?” said Mike.

The general glanced over his shoulder. “If only it were that simple, son. We can’t go with you. Besides, this isn’t a takeover. It’s an undercover mission.”

Casey shivered. *Zero backup? Oh crap!* It was truly not a reassuring thought, and now she was even more confused. “So why can this Torn come and not you?”

“Thorn,” the general corrected, “and he can accompany you on this mission because he’s not Agarthian.”

Another kid? Scowling, she stared ahead. They were keen on saving the world, as long as it didn’t involve moving their own butts into action and risking their own lives.

“You want us to face the evil aliens without someone like Orthon there to protect us?” asked Mike, his voice going up an octave. “He’s the one with the superman powers. We’re just kids, and unless you provide someone else who can jump on buildings and climb up walls like Spider-Man, this trip’s not happenin’.”

“There’s no way we can send up one of our people.” The general’s pace picked up as he walked across the room. “The rebels have one of the most advanced security systems in the universe, and it’s set to alert them if it recognizes our DNA profile. If one of our star warriors takes one step on that mothership, their security system will set off every alarm immediately. That’s why we can’t use one of our own teenagers. Your race and our race are similar, but there are still major DNA differences. The system won’t pick up your DNA profile because surface humans are not considered a threat. They know your government doesn’t believe in civilizations from other worlds, so they have no built-in security measures to protect them from you.”

Casey and Mike hurried to keep up with him.

“Now you know the three reasons we need you,” said General Ashtar.

Mike cleared his throat. “My mind is still trying to process it all. Can you refresh me one more time?”

“Certainly. One, we must trick the system and help pilot the ship with Thorn. Two, we need your DNA to get past security. And three, only a human can activate the microchip seconds prior to being placed into the weapon’s chamber.”

Casey nodded. For the first time, she truly understood, though some questions still rang in her head, particularly why “only a human” could activate the microchip. She had to wonder if this Torn or Thorn or whoever he was was some kind of inhuman creature.

Huge brass doors materialized in a burst of white light. When they parted, the general escorted them inside.

Casey stared at her reflection in the mirrored walls. Her body, face, and hair were covered in mud. Her eyes were bloodshot, and the dark and puffy half-moons underneath stood in strong contrast to her pale face. She lifted her hands and tried to smooth the disarrayed mess of black locks as best as she could. *How could a vacation turn into such a mess?*

A chime sounded, and the doors slid shut behind them.

“Level D2854, Hangar G,” the general ordered.

Mike wiped the sweat off his forehead. “This is all so wild.”

Casey’s stomach dropped as the elevator sped down thousands of feet, descending deeper and deeper into the Earth. A weird, ear-popping sensation filled her ears. She shouted over the ringing in her head, “General, are you sure there’s even a weapon up there?”

“We have confirmation of its existence.”

Casey leaned back and tried to understand everything he was telling her. “Your people, the ones who were evacuated...won’t they call for help when they can’t reach you?”

“Yeah. Surely they’ll know something’s wrong,” said Mike.

“I have no doubt about that, but intelligence reported this morning that the rebels have constructed an advanced force-field around Earth to keep everything and everyone out,” said General Ashtar. “Even when my people do come, it’ll take time to penetrate the shield, possibly days or more. We don’t have that much time. If we don’t do something and do it now, the world will cease to exist tomorrow.”

The elevator slowed to a halt; the doors swished open, and the passengers emerged. A long, narrow corridor stretched into oblivion before them. Dazzling, yellow light from an unknown source lit the way.

They arrived at a set of double doors. General Ashtar waved his hand across a control panel on the wall. The heavy doors clicked and opened into a huge, empty underground hangar deck. The silver ceiling arched high overhead. Below, the swirled marble cast a soft glow across the floor. A soldier saluted the general, barely sparing a glance toward her and Mike.

Mike’s eyes darted between the general, Casey, and the entire room. “So where’s the UFO?”

“The ship has a force-field, allowing it to go invisible when needed.” General Ashtar pointed to a marble balcony overlooking the room. Black, spiral pillars reached up to support the terrace overhead. “Turn off the force-field.”

She peered around her, unsure of what she could take in first. “Oh man! This is like... wow! Oh my gosh!” she whispered. Docked less than a football field away was one dome-shaped, metallic craft with two rows of rectangular windows. It appeared to be about fifty feet in diameter and at least fifteen feet high. Chills ran up and down her spine. There was no way they were going to be able to fly that thing. Help or not, she was sure they wouldn’t figure it out—not in a million years.

“That’s insane!” Mike shook Casey’s shoulder. “Can you believe this?”

She brushed off his hand before he dislocated her joint. “It’s incredible, but I bet I’d be able to see more without you shaking me to death at the same time.” He looked as nervous as she felt. Raising her eyebrows, she took a few tentative steps forward.

Behind them, the double doors opened wide. Casey turned in time to see a slim figure, a few inches shorter than Mike, walking into the room. Huge, black eyes stared back at her, almost swallowing the bright light. The figure cocked its oversized, bald head, lids blinking rapidly like a reptile, then inched closer and stretched out a hand, as though it wanted to grab hold of her.

Chapter 5

Casey froze, and her heart jumped in her chest. The being wore a one-piece, tight-fitting grey suit with black boots. It had two small openings for a nose, thin slits for lips, and no ears. *An alien? Yes, unmistakably.* In fact, the being looked exactly like one of the famous aliens from Roswell, New Mexico, but Casey was sure it couldn’t be. Everyone knew the photos were fakes, staged by people to make a few bucks. She peered down and pinched her arm hard to make sure once again that she wasn’t dreaming.

“Whoa.” Mike held his arm out to Casey. “Can you try me too?”

Her heart pounded, and she took a few long steps back, glancing at Mike. “Oh man. He looks like the beings that chased us and took Jack.”

Mike threw his arms up in the air, his voice dramatic. “It’s official. We’re doomed. The War of the Worlds has begun.”

General Ashtar put a hand on his shoulder. “There is no need to worry. I assure you that Thorn is on our side.” He turned to make the official introduction. “Thorn, this is Mike and Casey. Mike and Casey, this is Thorn.”

Casey had to wonder why the general hadn’t bothered to tell them that the third pilot, his so-called “good friend” wasn’t even human. It would’ve been nice to know so she could have prepared herself for the shock. “He’s...it’s an...” She paused, hesitating to say the word, in case Thorn would understand and be insulted.

“Ya think?” smiled Mike. “We’ve been around aliens for hours. What’s the difference now?”

“The others might be tall, but at least they appear human. This one doesn’t,” she whispered, her eyes wide. “It’s like a close encounter of the third kind.”

“Interaction with an alien—in other words, meeting me,” said Thorn in a high-pitched, almost squeaky voice.

Casey jumped, surprised that he sounded just like a kid—a very young kid.

His eyes continued to stay fixed on her. “But don’t be embarrassed. I won’t take it personally.”

Now, General Ashtar’s words made sense. Thorn couldn’t activate the microchip because he wasn’t human. It’d be up to Casey and Mike.

“Greetings,” said Mike.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Thorn held up his hand as though in a peace sign. “My leaders sent me down here to stop the rebel troops. Do you wish to save the human population from being destroyed?”

Casey stared at his long fingers, his odd black nails, and skin that seemed as dry as leather. “Is this a trick question? Of course we want to save the people living here.” For a moment, all she could do was stare at him. He was the third pilot, and choosing him made perfect sense. He was thin and likely weighed less than she did. Still, she was going to find it difficult to work alongside an alien that looked exactly like the ones that had given chase inside the cave. It was going to take much more than a polite introduction from him if he was to earn her trust. “But why do you want to save humanity if you’re not even human?” she asked bluntly, not really caring about manners.

Thorn shrugged, wide-eyed, as though he didn’t see that one coming. “It’s barbaric to destroy billions of Earthlings just to steal their planet and call it your own. That would be barbaric to treat any beings like that. Besides, I like the people living here.”

“Fair enough.” She didn’t want to point out that not all people were worth loving, and some might

run for the hills at his sight. Others might stop to gawk, laugh, or stare in awe. Then there were the ones like those white-suited guys in E.T. who would have their own agenda. They might want to prod and experiment on Thorn just like the aliens were probably doing to Jack.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Thorn.

She had to wonder if it was true. She peered at him interested, waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t, she said, “Okay, I’ll bite. What am I thinking?”

“You can’t trust me because I look just like them—the bad guys.”

She let out a long breath, then frowned. “I’m sorry.”

Thorn waved his hand in the air. “It is understandable. You’ve probably gone through a lot, and I don’t blame you, but the people here trust me, and so should you. If our mission fails, I’ve just as much to lose as you.”

“Do you have much experience flying these things?” asked Mike.

“Only hundreds of years.” Thorn laughed and pointed behind him. “I’m a Grey, and this is my ship.”

Mike shook his head, impressed. “So what’s the scoop on the bad guys anyway?”

“Many years ago, Shiek Tio, now known as Commander Tio, became the leader of a dangerous band of criminals, after what your scientists did back in 1961.”

Casey wrung her hands at the thought that humans had created this mess. “According to Orthon, they lost the probe.”

“Yes. It crashed on our planet, poisoning our atmosphere. Thousands of my people joined his crazy cause, seeking revenge. They made plans to take over Earth, but the problem was that their bodies weren’t compatible with the bacteria in your atmosphere. So they spent the next fifty years studying your planet, working on military strategies, and developing a vaccine until a solution was found.”

“So if they’re trying to take over now, they obviously conquered the bacteria problem,” said Casey.

Thorn nodded. “Yes, in the form of an injection. It took many years, but the rebel scientists finally came up with the perfect vaccination.”

“Which you obviously took, or else you wouldn’t be down here,” Casey retorted.

“Yes. General Ashtar got his hands on some vials for my team and me.”

“But why do they experiment on humans?” asked Mike.

“Millions of our people were killed immediately. Millions more are still dying. Commander Tio is looking for a cure, so he wants to crossbreed your DNA with ours. All humans will work for their

experiments, but the best candidates are dark-haired Agarthians, which are very hard to come by. The rebels will do anything to get their hands on one.”

Casey blew out a long breath. “Been there, done that.”

“The rebel Greys are giving our people a bad name, so my government wants them caught and punished. My team’s been tracking them down.”

“Well, all things considered, it’s nice to meet you,” Casey finally conceded, and her muscles relaxed. It was good to know they had Thorn and his people on their side. *Score one for the good guys.*

Mike moved closer and extended his hand, grabbing Thorn’s in a tight grip. “I guess you could say we’re partners then. You said there were more of you. What happened to your friends?”

Thorn pulled back his hand, staring at the ground. “My team was shot down yesterday. I’m afraid I am the sole survivor.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Casey wished she could say it was all for a good cause, but she couldn’t since the battle wasn’t won yet. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what he was going through. If she had lost Mike and Jack and was left alone to finish their mission, she’d surely lose her mind.

Mike inched closer, muttering under his breath, “General, can we trust him?”

The general nodded. “Thorn has a pure heart and is a legend in our galaxy. He even saved my life on a mission once. He’s our very own hero.” The general placed his hand on Thorn’s shoulder. “You’re always willing to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, my friend.”

It was heartwarming to hear that such a small creature could have saved such a big guy.

Casey smiled when the general turned toward her and Mike, “Our fate rests in your hands. Will you assist us?”

No one had ever asked her anything so important, and she felt a tear gathering in the corner of her eye with the weight of it. Taking a deep breath, she braced herself to ask a question that’d been on her mind all along. “You never told us what’ll happen if we get caught.” She had to know. “Will they kill us?” Her voice caught slightly as she imagined being forced to walk off the plank of some spaceship, only to plummet into outer space forever.

Mike averted her gaze. “Of course they will. The only question is how.”

She swallowed hard against her racing pulse. It shouldn’t have come as such a surprise, but he was right. She’d known it all along.

General Ashtar hesitated before answering. “They’ll put you into a coma-like state called *deep sleep* and take you back to their base for experimentation.”

“Whoa, dude!” Mike held up a hand. “Give me Jaws any day. At least I can try to fight and kick those off, but you’re talking about little green men who want to probe my brain. Give me one good reason why I should sign up for that.”

Casey’s breath caught in her throat. She so desperately wanted it to all be a nightmare she could wake up from, but it wasn’t that simple. “What kind of experiments?” Her voice trailed off in a quiver. She took a deep breath and then let it out again. She put up a trembling hand, the salty, metallic smell of blood suddenly invading her nostrils. She cringed, and her gut feeling told her Mike would be in just as much trouble. Yes, he was a big guy, but even he wasn’t immune to torture.

General Ashtar towered above her with a desperate look on his face. He peered into her eyes, as if she was his only hope. “I know how you feel. I get it. But destiny has chosen you.”

“Oh my gosh! The more I think about it, the more I know he’s right.” Mike grabbed Casey’s hands, staring at her with wide, shiny eyes. “Out of all the people who could’ve landed on their doorstep, it was us. Destiny chose you and me! Us, Casey—no one else but us. Think of it like this...our tides of life—yours and mine—connecting in one single purpose to—”

Pulling her hands back, she had to interrupt him. “I’m onboard, so you can stop. How’s your pain tolerance?”

Mike’s brow furrowed, as he seemed to ponder the question. “I admit, the idea of getting caught is scary, but if we stay down here, we’re as good as dead, just like everyone on this planet. We have to think about your mom and dad, about our family and friends, about Jack. They’re worth the risk of getting caught.”

“I’m not scared,” Casey said, because she was far beyond that, but she wasn’t about to let Mike see it. Anyway, he had a point: Jack was worth the risk, and so was everyone else she knew.

“So will you do it?” General Ashtar’s compassionate blue eyes stared into hers as he waited for her answer. His entire world and hers depended on what she and Mike decided.

Pushing her fears to the back of her mind, she took a deep breath to focus. There was no way she could refuse. After all, they were Earth’s last chance. She couldn’t bear to think of Jack all alone on that alien mothership. He was the reason she took the injection earlier. It was all about getting him back, and the dangers she faced weren’t important anymore. All that mattered was seeing Jack again. “When do we get started? Jack’s waiting.”

Mike beamed at her as the general continued, “Soon. Once you accomplish your objective, you may begin a rescue operation to find your friend. If all goes well...” The sudden hesitation in his voice

didn't escape her. "If all goes well, you'll be allowed to return home."

That made it clear that the general really didn't even know if Jack was still alive. It wasn't the greatest pep talk, but at least he didn't try to smash her hopes. "We'll survive, and we'll find Jack. We have to." She straightened, setting her jaw as her eyes locked on his. Grasping his cold fingers, she firmly shook his hand. "General, you have a deal."

General Ashtar clapped Mike's shoulder, his face stern, his lips set into a grim line. "What do you think? Your answer could mean the difference between life and death."

Mike nodded. "I'm in, no doubt about it, but do you think you could throw in a pair of shoes?" He laughed, pointing at his bare feet.

Thorn's voice rang behind her. "Yes, paddling across the floor might not help us stay inconspicuous once we get in."

"All your needs will be met. Now, please follow me to the vessel." The general's heavy boots echoed as he walked to the low arch carved in the thick wall.

"I can't believe we're going inside an alien spaceship." Casey followed, her gaze fixed on the matte material.

Mike ran his hand across the smooth metal. Following his lead, she touched the side of the ship. It was as thin as aluminum but cold and hard as marble. It didn't have any insignia, seams, or welding marks, and it seemed to be made in one piece, as though someone had just carved it out of a huge aluminum mountain. Her fingers tingled as she pressed her palm harder, leaving a wet print that disappeared almost instantly. There were no greasy stains and no need to polish. "Wow. If we could patent this stuff, we'd be richer than the Facebook guy."

"Are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?" whispered Mike. "Let's get a tiny piece to analyze later. I bet this stuff could make us millions."

She held up a finger. "Don't you dare. If they see you trying to steal stuff, they'll change their minds and never let us go." Her palm lingered on the brilliant, mirror-like surface. "It feels like stainless steel, but I don't think it's made of that."

"You're correct," came Thorn's voice from behind. "The material's called *reticulium*, a lightweight metal that's very strong, thin, and nearly indestructible."

Mike shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Do you have a sample?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Casey elbowed him. "Did you say, 'nearly indestructible'? Then how were you shot down?"

“Good point,” said Mike. “Ask as many questions as you can think of. That’ll help us in our research later.”

The general shot her a questioning look. If Mike didn’t keep it together, he’d blow their chances of ever going back home. She laughed, hoping it sounded genuine enough. “I’m so sorry for my friend here. He’s a bit, uh…” She tapped a finger on her temple, making a cuckoo noise. “You should’ve seen him the first time he discovered the remote control to his TV set. I couldn’t peel him away from it for a whole month. And then the toaster. Now that experience will—”

“Whatever,” Mike said in her ear. “She’s so exaggerating! Who wouldn’t know how to use a remote control or a toaster?”

Thorn raised his eyebrows and continued, “The rebel Greys scrambled our signals, jamming our equipment. When we crashed, the Fotina crystals burst, allowing lethal gas to leak out. I opened the doors immediately and headed down the ramp, but I passed out. When I awoke, everyone was…” He paused, as if he couldn’t dare to say the words.

“I’m sorry, Thorn,” said Mike.

“That’s so sad. If there’s anything I can do…” Casey let her voice trail off, hoping he could hear how genuine she was.

Thorn slowly blinked his eyes. “Thanks for your concern. General Ashtar was nice enough to replace the Fotina crystals and restore the ship, so we’re in good shape once again. I wish I could think of a way to get around the weight requirement with the pilot seats in the cockpit, but it’s far too complicated and not my area of expertise. I’m a field agent and not a scientist.”

Mike glanced up. “So what’s the secret to getting in?”

Casey scanned the ship surface for an entryway. “Maybe on the side. Hmm…where’s the front of this thing?”

Thorn chuckled.

She heard a loud *click*, and a small panel slid open, revealing a previously hidden door. A steep ramp descended ten feet to the ground. Casey jumped a step back, her hand flying up to calm her fluttering heart. “Boy, that startled me.”

“I’ll wait out here,” said General Ashtar, shifting the weight of his massive frame from one foot to the other. “The doorway’s not really designed for me.”

Thorn’s slim body moved easily up the ramp and through the entrance, and Casey took that as her cue to follow him.

Cool air fanned over Casey as she stood frozen in the doorway. She felt a rush of energy passing through her. Glancing around the interior, she trembled at her first glimpse inside a flying saucer. The inside seemed to be made of the same strange material. With her heart pounding like a drum, she walked in slowly, her head high and her fingers barely touching things as she traced the surfaces. The floor shimmered like polished tiles, each carved block casting a soft glow across the deck. The ceiling featured pictures of plants, geometric figures, crosses, animals, and birds. The odd symbols and designs resembled Egyptian hieroglyphics, painted in a variety of colors. They seemed so out of place in a civilization that was supposed to have descended from another planet. With a little more confidence, she walked to the center of the room. Various lights flashed across graphs and star charts, computers, and sophisticated equipment covering the walls.

Thorn motioned with his hand. “There are three levels, and we are on the second. The top level is for storage. The lower level is the propulsion system, which runs everything.” He pointed to a flight of stairs. “Follow me.”

The metal staircase wound down to a giant room filled with hot, stuffy air and more than two dozen long, icicle-shaped crystals lining the walls. Each stood ten feet high and was five feet wide at the base. Blue sparks chased each other across the surface, and through the crystalline structure, gold, silver, and platinum-colored coils or wires encased them all. A low, powerful *hum* reverberated off the walls, as if singing in harmony with the ship’s systems.

Thorn walked past her and pointed toward the shiny figures. “We use crystal technology to store and transmit power. Each has a flawless, polished surface to ensure a constant flow of energy.”

A thick metallic pole, stretching from floor to ceiling, stood in the middle of the dark room, flashing different colors in sequence. Heat radiated from it like a giant sun lamp. It made crackling and fizzing sounds that reminded Casey of ice cubes immersed in warm water. *Jack would so love this.*

Thorn motioned over to the colorful pillar, blinking like a Christmas tree. “This device is called an *antigravity drive*, and it helps us run and control the ship. We can manipulate gravity and travel at the speed of light, breaking the law of physics.”

“Did you hear that?” Mike said in her ear. “How much do you think American Airlines would pay for this stuff?”

She slapped the back of his head, glad that the general wasn’t there to hear Mike’s feeble attempts at fame. “Just hush and listen.”

Mike held up his arm, fingers pointing toward a crystal that cast a green aura on his skin.

“C’mon. Let’s go.” Casey grabbed him by his shoulders and nudged him up the narrow stairs. “I sure don’t need you trying to touch the fancy colors.”

“We’re back to the central level.” Thorn pointed to a raised, circular platform with three pilot seats facing a giant, oblong cockpit window. “This is where we’ll sit to control the craft.”

She peered down at a lit console. Switches, instruments, and symbols filled the oval control panel, and the symbols surprised her. They weren’t strange and elaborate as she expected; rather, they were simple geometric shapes: circles, triangles, squares, and a few others. They were arranged in hundreds of different combinations, with accompanying numbers.

Mike planted himself in the middle seat. “This must be the captain’s command chair. Look at all of this top-notch, high-tech stuff.”

Casey shook her head as a thought occurred to her. General Ashtar had said they were 5,000 years ahead of surface humans in technology, so she wondered why the aliens would start the invasion with a race of beings who possessed sophisticated weapons and technology instead of on the surface, where people didn’t have all the fancy gadgetry and know-how to fight them. “I’ve been wondering, why didn’t the rebel Greys attack the surface of Earth first? We don’t have any technology close to this, and we could’ve been easily wiped out.”

Thorn nodded, seemingly impressed with her insight. “Good point. You might think Earth’s surface dwellers would be the easiest target to begin with, but the Agarthians would’ve come out with full force, outnumbering the rebels in ships and manpower. The Federation could’ve been called for backup, and the Greys wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“So they came up with a better plan?” said Mike. “This is their Plan B?”

Thorn nodded again. “Yes. What better military strategy than to disable your most powerful enemy first? With the Agarthians paralyzed and unable to call for help, the rebel Greys hold all the power.”

Casey pondered. It all made perfect sense, and it was brilliant—at least for the Greys.

Thorn’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Are you ready to get started?”

This was going to be scarier than Driver’s Ed. A shudder ran through her as she met Thorn’s black gaze, then inclined her head in hesitant agreement.

Mike jumped from his seat. “Who needs training? Let’s fly this baby and go save Jack.”

She grabbed his arm. “Turn it down a notch, will ya, Skywalker? We’ll be no good to Jack if we die on the way up there. May I remind you that it took you three months to learn how to put your car in first gear?”

“Really?” Thorn’s eyes grew wider than they were already.

Mike playfully elbowed her. “She’s exaggerating again.”

She laughed, and Thorn joined in, even though he didn’t seem convinced. Biting her tongue, she decided to keep silent for a change, and not point out that Mike still couldn’t effectively operate a can opener.

“Let’s start your lessons then.” Thorn started to walk to the doorway and glanced over his shoulder. “Some of Agarth’s top soldiers are waiting for us in the Conference and Operations Center, as well as nourishment.”

Casey’s stomach rumbled. “Dinner?”

“Yes,” Thorn said.

Mike shot her a sideways look. “Good, ‘cause I’ve been waiting for a big, fat juicy burger all day.”

She tried to smile, but she had a nagging thought in the back of her mind that she might be facing her own personal last supper. *Oh boy. They better have chocolate.*

Chapter 6

The moment Casey had been fearing finally arrived. She tried to ignore the dry sensation in her mouth as she and Mike stood in front of the saucer-shaped craft, waiting for the general. The spacecraft couldn’t be flown without her—a detail that still hadn’t registered with her mind. She clutched her chest. “My heart’s still racing. I still can’t believe we outwitted the security precautions and didn’t get hurt like the other Agarthian that’d tried to rig the seats.”

“You can’t blame General Ashtar. He had to give it a test run before he wasted all that time on us. After risking my life in that little experiment, I think I deserved a burger.”

“I didn’t know there were so many ways to dress up vegetables.” Casey chuckled and tugged at his arm nervously. It was better to talk about their meal than to risk letting her mind roam free toward dangerous territory—a spaceship hovering thousands of feet in the air as she struggled to remember what all the signals on the dashboard were. She continued, “Can you believe these people are vegetarians? Jack would’ve been impressed with that.”

Mike nodded, but his eyes were glazed over, telling her that he, too, was a million miles away. “Yeah. He’s such a health nut. They thought I was crazy when I asked if they could fry the potatoes.”

She laughed. “Don’t think they actually knew what frying is.”

“Everyone in their right mind knows what French fries are,” said Mike, “and where’s my burger?”

“Sorry, but I’m pretty sure they don’t serve 8,000-calorie quadruple burgers dripping with greasy cheese and mayo.” She leaned her head on his shoulder, pausing for a moment before she continued, “I can’t stop thinking about Jack.”

He let out a long breath, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. “Me neither.”

“We can’t mess this up. He’s counting on us.” She desperately hoped she’d remember everything they’d been taught. “How’s your memory, Mike? ‘Cause they sure crammed a lot in there in such a short time. All that stuff’s just swimming in my head.”

He laughed. “You’re trusting me when I barely remember what I had for breakfast? But I can try for you. And don’t worry, Thorn is doing all the driving. It’s not like we’re being left to fly the thing all by ourselves.”

“Thank goodness for that. So are you ready to take on the intergalactic army?”

“As ready as one can be after a few slices of tomato and raw lettuce, but we’ve got Thorn.” He winked. “And you’ve got me, including my scattered brain. That’s bound to count for something.”

He wasn’t the only scattered one. Casey smiled as she reached up to give him a fist-bump.

“Fist-bumps are for friends. I think we’re more than that.” He pulled her into his arms and captured her lips in a long kiss, sending tingles down her entire body. Easing away, his gaze drifted to the ship. “Okay. I can’t believe we’re making out in front of something that’s not supposed to exist.”

She took a few steps forward, her black boots squeaking on the polished floor. All she could do was stare at the gorgeous silver craft. She still couldn’t believe she was going to pilot a ship with an alien.

“At least we’re dressed for the part.” Smoothing out the wrinkles on her emblem, she peered down at her blue jumpsuit where three white circles overlapped on her chest. Wearing a one-piece was so 1990s, but at least the belt sat well and gave her an hourglass figure.

“Are you okay? You keep pinching your sleeves,” said Mike. “You look great. This goes well with your, uh…” He looked her up and down, and she felt her cheeks blush.

“My eyes? Thank you.”

Mike winked again. “Yeah. That too.”

Before Casey could retort, the door opened, and the general approached. A soldier carrying an armful of backpacks followed closely behind him.

Mike straightened and saluted.

The general handed them each a silver laser pistol and black holster. “You’ll need stun weapons. These are very similar to the ones you used in your training.”

Casey turned the gun in her hands and examined it from every angle. With its silver coating and indentations for tighter grip, it looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, but she could tell from its construction and the seriousness of the situation that it didn’t come from a Hollywood prop department. A little target practice might’ve been nice, but as usual, everyone seemed to assume Mike and she were born warriors. The only experience she had firing any kind of weapon was the shooting gallery at the fair, aiming for tiny targets glued to moving yellow ducks. Even then, she didn’t walk away with a teddy bear.

“This is weird,” whispered Mike. “I feel bad, like I’m doing something I shouldn’t be.”

“Playing with guns? I know what you’re talking about.” She had never touched a real gun before, stun gun or otherwise, and it sent her insides into somersaults. “I can’t believe it’s so light.” She ran her fingers across the smooth chrome. It felt cold under her hot skin, uneven where etched, raised images of stars and planets met on the handle and sides. She fastened her holster around her waist and put the weapon away, secretly hoping she’d never have to use it. She thought she should talk to the general about her fears, but he looked busy conversing with his aide on technical stuff she didn’t even get.

Mike raised his gun in the air when a red laser beam shot from the pistol and struck the ceiling above. The loud *crash* echoed off the walls.

Casey screamed and ducked for cover, dropping her own gun to the floor. “What’re you doing? Have you lost your mind?”

“Who did that?” asked the general in a stern voice.

“Mike!” said Casey, wide-eyed. She stayed glued to the floor, in case Mike lost control over his lead finger again. You do realize you could’ve shot something important...or me!”

“I’m sorry. It just went off by accident.”

“What if you put a hole in the side of this baby and we didn’t find out until we were 10,000 feet in the air?” Casey rolled her eyes. It wasn’t some wild west cowboys and Indian expo. She wished he could be serious and just stay out of trouble for one minute.

General Ashtar snatched the weapon from his hand and then picked up Casey’s. “I believe the stun setting will be ample for your needs.” He turned a few knobs and touched several illuminated buttons. An amber light flashed on the muzzle and beeped twice. “You’ll be able to incapacitate anyone for

three standard hours.”

Someone entered, and Casey turned in time to see the commander standing in the doorway as a large piece of glass fell and struck the floor by his feet. He jumped back, crushing thousands of tiny shards under his heavy boots. “I thought I heard shooting,” he said, glaring straight at Mike.

She opened her mouth to speak when the commander cut her off. “Be careful where you aim. You’re using brand new katayla chips, which are more powerful than anything you’ve ever seen.”

She didn’t want to point out that she’d never seen any sort of weapon apart from an old shotgun used to shoot plastic ducks with foam pellets. “We’ll try to remember.” Casey glared at Mike as she plucked sharp pieces out of her hair.

“I’m so sorry about that, sir,” said Mike.

The commander dropped his gaze to the floor and shook his head. “We’re all going to die,” he muttered under his breath.

Mike blinked. “I didn’t know it would just go off like that.”

“This mission’s far too dangerous for teenagers,” the commander mumbled. “They’re not properly trained or emotionally mature.”

“Yes, I admit it’s very dangerous,” General Ashtar gave his shoulder a squeeze, as if to reassure him, “but it’s the only way to save us and the human race from extinction.”

Casey let out a breath and shook her head. *No pressure or anything.*

Mike shot the commander and the general a questioning look. “You do realize we’re standing here, right?”

“That’s the frightening part,” the commander whispered. Casey leaned in to catch his words. “The only option we have left is to rely on mere children. We must leave the fate of our world in the hands of surface humans. We are helpless otherwise, and that is a scary thought.”

Mike squared his shoulders. “No need to be condescending. We’re risking our lives too.”

Casey didn’t want to point out that there’d be no lives to risk if they didn’t give the mission a try. If no one tried, the rebels would win without a fight. Either way, they might die. It was better to focus on the situation at hand, because once she entered Mike’s dangerous terrain, she might not be so keen on leaving the false sense of security she had among the Agarthians. “So how are we going to find this mothership?”

“The enemy’s cloaking technology makes it impossible for us to locate it,” said the general.

Thorn appeared beside her and joined in the conversation. “I’ll be able to find it with the Bladmash

sensors installed in this scout ship. The mothership has to be close for this attack to be taking place.”

General Ashtar signaled his aide. The tall man stepped forward and handed them four backpacks. “We found these in the storage area on the ship,” said the general. “They are the latest standard military-issue packs used by the Greys. They’ve been packed with everything we think you’ll need for your mission.” He signaled his aide once more, and the aide handed each of them a digital watch with a thick, black band.

Casey looked at the square-faced timepiece. It looked futuristic, like something straight out of *Star Trek*. “A high-tech wristwatch?”

“They’re communicators,” said General Ashtar.

Mike turned the device over in his hand and grinned. “This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. Is it like some kinda spy gadget? Can it make me invisible or build an invincible shield around me?”

General Ashtar furrowed his brows. “This device will give you the remaining mission time.”

“Cool,” said Mike. “Does this thing pack some twenty-first-century technology or what?”

“Excuse me?” said the general.

Mike ran his fingers across the big LCD screen. “Does it come with a cell, a PDA, camera, an MP3 player, or Internet connection? Oooh...can I update my Facebook status on this thing? Boy, do I have a lot to tweet about.”

Casey let out a small giggle. “If I’m going to wear an oversized men’s watch, it better have some really cool apps.”

The general shook his head and wrinkled his brow in confusion and continued, “It’s also equipped with a GPS chip and a map navigator that will enable you to find each other in the event that you get separated. See the circle of red lights? There’s one for each of you. When you separate, four red lights will appear in a mini-map surrounded by a directional compass on the LCD screen.”

“So we can always find each other?” said Casey.

“Yes. Just ensure Jack gets both a watch and a backpack when you locate him.”

Mike rummaged through his sack. “There’s all kinds of stuff here.” He pulled out a thin, rectangular, object about the size of a Nintendo DS. “I hope you didn’t forget to pack *Downhill Jams*.” He looked at Thorn, whose forehead was visibly creased. “What? It’s my favorite DS skateboarding game.”

“That is not a game. It is a navigational tool.” Thorn grabbed the device and stuffed it back. “You’ll have more time to examine these items later.”

Mike pulled a face and mumbled, “oh, okay.”

Holding the gadget in her hands, Casey could feel the seconds slowly trickling by. It’d be time soon. “I know you and the commander have your doubts, but Mike and I will give this mission everything we have.” She only hoped her best would be good enough.

“As will I,” said Thorn.

General Ashtar gazed down at them. “Your participation in this mission is greatly appreciated, as well as your commitment not only to your own race, but to ours as well. You are all to be commended.”

As he finished speaking, a brief *snap* echoed, and the room went black, the only light shining from inside the flying saucer’s open door.

Casey jumped and let out a yelp. *What now? Are the rebels attacking?* The thought made her wince, and she grabbed Mike’s hand for comfort.

The commander’s words cut through the room. “Power outage.”

Casey let out a breath when the door burst open below the balcony control room and another blond head popped in. “They’ve shut down our power grid.”

“Then our timetable has changed. We must launch our mission immediately, before they block our passageway as well.” General Ashtar’s voice was firm and demanded action.

“Yes, sir,” said Thorn.

Casey’s hand trembled as she rubbed her face, her brain still circling around the general’s words. The time had come, literally knocking on her door. Sweat gathered on her brow and trickled down the center of her back as she hesitated, waiting for further instructions.

“We will not fail, General.” Thorn sprinted up the ramp, the metal click-clacking under his feet. “Come on, you two. Now is the time.”

She blinked, her feet still frozen to the ground. There was no time for goodbyes or good luck wishes. No one gave her a bouquet or a box of chocolates to sweeten her up before the mission. She hadn’t expected a parade, of course, but this was the worst goodbye she’d ever received. Hesitating, she followed Thorn and caught a glimpse of the general’s set jaw and taut face; it wasn’t the look of a confident man. He was clearly overcome with terror, intermingled with the knowledge of imminent doom. All the talk about faith in them had been nothing but a way to boost their confidence. She had the strong feeling that it was more a suicide mission than a short journey to deliver some goods.

General Ashtar crossed a fist over his chest. A voice rolled across Casey’s mind, and she flinched. “*Find that weapon at all costs. We’ll ask the Great Creator for your safe return.*” *The Great*

Creator? Casey turned toward him. *Does he mean God? Do we even have the same God?*

The general projected his answer using more mental telepathy. *“There is only one God.”*

A grin grew across her lips.

“Casey, the dude’s talking inside my head,” blurted Mike.

“Mine too.” She shot General Ashtar a quick smile and saluted, arm over chest, as the door slowly closed. Then she leapt into a chair and buckled her seatbelt.

Casey’s stomach clenched as she tugged at her seatbelt and peered at Thorn. Her brain felt woozy, almost like she had just gotten off some spinning teacup ride. Breathing in and out, she forced oxygen into her lungs to calm her racing pulse. With every fiber of her being, she wanted to bolt right off the ship, but something held her back. She’d given her word and wouldn’t bail out now.

Thorn turned to face her. “Ready?”

She tried to smile confidently, but her shaky voice gave her away. “As long as there’re barfbags onboard.” Closing her eyes, she let Jack’s image take hold of her thoughts—and for a minute she could even hear his laughter. She leaned her head back against the seat and gripped the armrests. “Hang on, Jack. We’re on our way.”

“We’ll scour that alien mothership until we find him,” said Mike. “That’s a promise.”

Something in his tone gave her hope. Maybe it was his determination to find his best friend.

Thorn leaned over and turned a dial until a circuit flashed on the dashboard. “Bridge, we’re ready to launch.”

“Acknowledged,” a voice responded from the comm.

“I’m starting the countdown sequence.” Thorn inserted a crystal into the main computer and pressed a button.

Another dial blinked on the console. An array of lights flashed across the control panel. The craft swayed and lifted slowly off the hangar deck.

This is it. Casey breathed in and held in the air for a second as a shudder ran down her spine. *Now or never, thank goodness.* “We’re taking off,” she chanted as a sharp, clean smell like that lingering in the air after a thunderstorm wafted inside the cockpit. If Jack had been there, he would have been able to tell her what it was.

“Jack would tell you the smell is ozone,” said Thorn. “It’s a colorless gas emitted from high-voltage electricity.”

She had forgotten for a moment that she was stuck on a spaceship with some alien version of Criss

Angel, that mind-reading guy on TV. She decided she'd have to engage in some serious thought censoring.

Thorn smirked. "Are you shocked that I can read your thoughts?"

"After everything I've seen, I guess I shouldn't be." She shrugged and peered out at the giant trapdoor sliding open in the floor of the hangar. "Will every alien be able to read my thoughts up there?"

"No. It takes years of practice to read human thoughts. None of them have that kind of experience. Trust me. Most of the rebel Greys have never even met a person from Earth. So we're safe, except for Commander Tio. But even he would have to concentrate, so in quick passing, you'll be okay."

They plunged straight down into a tunnel deep in the ground.

Thorn cast them a sideways glance. "Don't worry. This is the back way out. Oh...one more thing. *Hang on!*"

As they sped through the twists and turns of the tunnel, streaked with blue lights, a deafening roar ripped from the walls. The blue lights disappeared, and blackness surrounded her.

Casey gripped the arms of her seat tighter to brace herself against the vibrations traveling from the ship up her legs and inside her body. She was thrown to the left and right just like a rollercoaster—a dark and thrilling ride, and she didn't even have to pay admission. "About those barfbags..." she began, thinking maybe she shouldn't have eaten so much of that delicious salad. When a wave of nausea flooded her stomach, she held her breath and tried not to throw up.

The underground passage ended, and they shot up with a *hiss*, high into the bright sky bolting through the thick clouds, the country side flashing by just a few hundred feet below.

Casey stared at the beautiful scenery as they leisurely glided over wildflowers in amazing shades of gold, red, and purple that carpeted the rolling hills.

"I bet you never imagined seeing this sort of landscape down here," said Thorn. "From what I understand of the surface world, this is much like your own home of..." Thorn paused, clearly not knowing where his copilots lived. "You're from?"

"Huntington Beach, California," said Casey. "I'll give you any answer you want, as long as you don't do that mind-reading thing, 'cause it kind of freaks me out."

Mike grinned. "It's the surfing capital of the world, home to the U.S. Open Surfing Championships and the NSSA."

Thorn cocked his head in confusion, so Casey explained, "The NSSA is the National Scholastic

Surfing Association, a group for young surfers who haven't turned pro yet.”

“Wait...there's more. It's also—”

She held up a hand to stop Mike. “I bet I can say it quicker.” She looked at him and smirked.

“Yeah, I know the spiel since I've only listened to it a million times. And I mean that in the nicest way, babe.”

He smirked back.

“Thorn, in case you haven't noticed yet, our Mike's a celebrity,” said Casey. “He's THE Mike Pierce.”

Mike cut in with a big grin. “Yep. That's me. International surfing star.”

“Really?” asked Thorn, impressed.

She nodded. “Yes. He's won every single award and competition in the world of amateur surfing. He's been on TV and in lots of magazines too. And last but not least, he models and represents famous brands of surfing gear and clothing.”

Mike's eyes lit up. “Yeah, having sponsors is awesome, because there's nothing like getting paid to surf.”

“Very prestigious,” said Thorn.

A smile grew across his lips. “It's quite an achievement, especially for someone as young as me. Someday I'm going to be a famous movie star and pro surfer.”

Mike could have and would have gone on for hours if no one reined him in. As much as she hated to change his favorite subject—himself—she couldn't listen to another one of his surfing stories, at least not when she was dying to know more about alien life. “So, Thorn, where're you from?”

“I live thirty-nine light years away, in the star system of Zeta Reticuli. Mike, I need you to push down all the blue crystals with triangles on them.”

As he pushed them down one by one, they glowed. “How many miles is that away from here?”

“It is about 220 trillion,” answered Thorn, fussing with the red knobs.

Mike let out a whistle. “Dude, that's far! I guess you don't take the bus, huh? How long does it take you to get here?”

“If I don't take a wormhole, I can get to Earth in a little over eighty-nine days.”

Wormhole? Casey's jaw dropped. Like a portal in a science fiction show?

Thorn's fingers danced across the console. “Full speed ahead!” He made a ninety-degree turn and raced over the land at fantastic speeds, zigzagging through the clouds.

Casey watched a blur of scenery flash through the glass window. The floor beneath her started to quiver, along with the walls, ceiling, and the chair she was buckled into. She grabbed her armrest and said, “Thorn! What’s going on?”

Mike shot her a confused look, wondering why Thorn wasn’t replying.

She glared at him as the walls vibrated harder, the motion pushing her around in her seat. “This thing is equipped with parachutes, right?”

There was still no answer; Thorn’s eyes were glued to the gauges.

An ear-piercing siren blared as the room became engulfed with blinking red lights. With each jarring *thud*, chills shot up her spine. Things didn’t look so hot, but she needed to keep her wits and her cool. She refused to let fear consume her. Glancing out the window, she could see the big shadow from the ship dancing across the surface of a pristine lake they sped over.

“We’re losing altitude!” said Thorn. “Casey, pull down the orange crystal on your side. Mike, pull up the green one!”

Going down? As in crashing? She swallowed back the rising panic and swore to herself that she’d stay strong. She had to, and she had to trust Thorn to get them through it. “I’m on it!” The words came out barely louder than a whisper.

Casey’s head jerked backward and then snapped forward as the ship plunged forward, cutting through the white clouds like a knife. Looking out the window, she noticed a plume of dark smoke swirling outside the craft. She wanted to keep up hope and be brave. Still, she had to wonder if the ship would burn up before it even hit the ground. *Get me out of this ‘frying saucer’ already! Boy, won’t the aliens have a laughing fit at our expense. Fine pilots we make.* Her nausea bubbled up inside again, like she was in a simulator ride at the video arcade, only multiplied by a million.

“We’re going to die!” Mike mumbled as he tried to pull the green lever up.

“Keep it together, Pierce.” In a bold moment, Casey let go of the armrest and waved to get his attention, lest she give in to that nagging voice inside her head that kept telling her they might die long before they reached the mothership. She had to see Mike, if even for a second, but Thorn sat in the middle of them, fussing with buttons. If she was going to die, she wanted to see Mike’s eyes one last time—those beautiful green eyes. He clenched his jaw and gripped the rattling seat. She peered out the cockpit window as they bumped through the air and gulped at the mountain range of towering ice peaks looming ahead.

“Oh man! Oh man! Oh man!” yelled Mike.

They were going down, smashing into smithereens. She thought about her visit to Roswell, and a picture flashed across her mind. Millions of pieces from a wreckage, an alleged UFO, were scattered along the field at a ranch. She wondered if their ship would look the same way in the end.

Thorn pulled back on the lever as the ship dropped in altitude. A sudden loud banging, like hundreds of baseball bats hitting the plane, echoed beneath her feet. She looked out the window, though she shouldn't have. The ship skidded on its belly and skipped across the treetops. She squeezed her eyes closed and then opened them. The vibrations shook the floor like an earthquake. She braced for impact. Even if she somehow survived the crash, she wasn't sure she would survive the flames or toxic fumes. She shook away the thought of blackened, tangled, twisting metal burning in the charred trees

“Someone help us!” Mike wailed.

Straight ahead, the mountains were getting closer—and bigger. She sucked in a giant gulp of air. Her head jerked forward as Thorn clipped a row of towering trees on a twenty-foot ridge.

Casey's screams turned into desperate gasps of air. She squeezed her eyes shut and clutched the armrests. “God, please don't let me die!”

Chapter 7

The ship steadied as Thorn steered it 200 feet above the trees. That was definitely a plus, but they still weren't out of the woods yet, so to speak. They had to maneuver around the nearby mountain range, or else they were going to crash right into it.

Casey held her breath as the warning lights continued to blink. “Just pull the lever,” she yelled over the ear-splitting noise.

Reaching forward, Mike grasped the green crystal. The muscles on his arm flexed, and sweat gathered on his brows as he yanked. “It won't budge.”

She knew the ship would crash any moment, making every nerve fiber in her body scream. Adrenalin surged. “Try harder!”

Grimacing, he let out a groan. “Not working.”

“Try pushing the yellow button and then pull up,” said Thorn.

Casey shot him a disbelieving look. She wondered how he could possibly be so calm when they were about to explode into thousands of pieces—or worse, the ship might explode, and they'd be

floating in midair, waiting for the parachute to pop open when there wasn't one. The alarm grew in intensity, and the lights blinked faster.

"Pull up! Pull up!" yelled Thorn.

Finally, he had a natural panicked-sounding reaction, so Casey could let her own panic out as heavy vibrations shook the walls and snow-covered mountains inched closer. "We're going to crash!" For a moment, Casey thought the mountain peaks would tear right through the floor.

She spun in her seat, ready to pull the thing herself if Mike didn't do it soon. *What's the point in having that much muscle mass if the guy can't put it to use when it matters?*

Mike strained against his taut shoulder harness, frantically tossing and turning in his seat. "I'm telling you the thing is jammed!"

She stretched out her arm, her fingers barely touching the crystal as she tried to grab hold of it. When she did, she yanked it. "It's stuck."

Thorn gave it a shot, to no avail. "Hang in there. I'm going to override the system."

He pressed his palm against a red crystal, holding it in place. The veins on his forehead bulged as he groaned, straining to keep the crystal pressed. "We've less than a minute before impact."

Casey gripped the console and let out a long shriek as her heart started pumping harder. "Do something, Mike!"

"What do you expect me to do?" he yelled.

She wouldn't die. All she needed was a better grip on the crystal. She wouldn't go down without a fight. Before she could change her mind, she unbuckled her seatbelt and rushed over to him. Wrapping her hands around his, she shouted, "Pull NOW!"

Mike's hand tightened under hers, his heavy breathing brushing her cheek as he tugged. The crystal released with a loud, screeching sound. The ship made a sharp swerve to the right as it flew between the two glittering towers of ice.

Casey held tightly on to Mike, while Thorn pushed a lever and the ship straightened out. "Are we safe?" Her voice came low and coarse, fighting to find a way out of her throat.

Thorn nodded.

"Phew! I think I'm getting the hang of this." Mike took a deep breath and pointed to her seat. "You might want to sit back down—you know, just in case there's more turbulence."

Shaking, she nodded and slumped down. Wherever Mike went, drama followed, even if it wasn't his fault this time. From dangerous dinosaurs, to meeting aliens, to almost being smashed into a

mountain, the thrills never stopped in this place.

“Yes, it’s best to sit back down,” agreed Thorn.

Casey met Thorn’s gaze and grinned. “Is there any way we can do this without him?”

“Hey, I heard that,” said Mike in a playful tone. “What about showing a bit of gratitude after I saved your butt?”

“You so didn’t!” She shook her head, fighting the urge to slap the back of his head. Instead, she patted his shaking hand. *Cosmo* always said you should let the guy have his moment in the limelight. She smiled sweetly and rolled her eyes. “Of course, babe. You were awesome.”

“Thanks,” he said with a chuckle.

What made us think we could actually fly an alien ship? “We’re so screwed.”

“It wasn’t Mike’s fault the controls jammed,” said Thorn. “It took both of you to release the lever. You *can* do this.”

Casey fell back in her chair and let out a long sigh. She hoped Thorn was right, because if they couldn’t even fly the ship, the rest of the crazy plan was hopeless.

Thorn pulled down a group of glowing white crystals. “Time to head for the surface. We can’t go through the North or South Pole exits because they’re heavily guarded by rebel Greys, but I know another way. Two days ago, the general found a hole in the crust, most likely from an earthquake. It’ll be sealed up in rock eventually, but it’s open for now.”

For a moment, Casey just looked at him, aghast that he could be so calm and composed, as though nothing major happened.

The ship began to rise like an elevator through the jagged underground opening. The constant blur of brown gave way to hazy clouds as they sped past. She stared in awe out the cockpit window at the passing crust of Earth. *If only my science teacher could see me now.*

Mike’s voice pierced through her thoughts. “Man, I think the hole’s growing narrower. This ship’s never going to fit.”

“Easy fix.” A jolt rattled through the craft as Thorn’s fingers danced across the control panel, turning the UFO at a vertical angle.

Casey grabbed her seat, her knuckles white, as a strange buzzing sound like a thousand bees filling the air. Gritting her teeth, she hung on for dear life as a scream froze in her throat. She could have sworn the jarring vibrations shook every bone in her entire body. Minutes felt like hours, but finally they burst into the bright blue summer sky.

“Look!” said Mike, pointing. “Normal animals...and a normal sun.”

Gazing out, she peered down at moose grazing in an open patch of woods. A light dusting of snow covered the ground, glittering in the sun. *Sun? As in one sun!* She looked up and smiled at the blazing yellow ball. It was the most beautiful sight ever. She let out a big sigh of relief.

Thorn motioned toward the cockpit window. “Welcome to Alaska.”

Earth’s surface. If she could have gotten out, she’d have kissed the icy ground, thrown snow up in the air like a wild woman, and danced like she never did before. And then it dawned on her: She was inches away from an escape. Her heart pounded, and she closed her eyes for a brief moment, giving in to the screaming voice in her head that urged her to beg Thorn to drop her off right there in the snow—on the surface of Earth. Heck, she’d flag down a trapper in a dogsled being pulled by Siberian huskies if she had to. They might only travel at the rate of fifteen MPH, but that didn’t matter. At least she’d get home eventually. Her parents were out there, safe and waiting for her. If she made a run for it, she’d be holding them in her arms while someone else sorted out the mess with the rebel Greys. *No.* She shook her head, angry with herself for even thinking that an escape might solve her problems. Jack was still out there. She might relish returning to her parents, but she could never live with herself knowing that she’d betrayed her best friend.

Thorn pulled down on the left red lever on the control board. “Let’s take her up into outer space.”

“First, think we can go back and get my stomach?” asked Mike, hunching over and holding his abdomen.

Casey shot him a smile. She could always trust him to find the funny side to everything. His eyes seemed to return the smile, but a shadow crossed his face.

Swallowing, she turned away. Watching Mike fight with his inner demons wasn’t helping her win her own case.

The spacecraft ripped through the thick cloud layer and, in a matter of seconds, raced across the atmosphere. She stared out into the distance, and her jaw dropped. Vibrant oranges and yellows splashed out across the sky like a glorious sunset. Dark clouds dotted the beautiful scene before her.

“We’re passing through the layers of Earth’s atmosphere,” said Thorn. “This is the troposphere, where all of the water vapor, clouds, and precipitation are located.”

The ship bolted up above white sheets of clouds, and the scene before her faded into a sky decorated with pink waves of light, fewer clouds, and finally a blue layer. She knew from science class that it had to be the upper atmosphere. The sky darkened, and all sunlight vanished.

“I don’t believe it!” said Mike, looking out the cockpit window. “We’re really in the cosmos! Dude, we have got to be the youngest cosmonauts ever.”

Casey smiled as she peered at the fathomless black void of space, but then her heart sank in her chest. For a moment, she’d felt the opportunity of escape whisper in her ear, but now it had all gone down the gutter. Tiny diamonds flashed in the distance, reminding her of a trip to the Painted Desert. Her parents used to lay out a thick blanket, and they would all snuggle up to admire millions of stars painted across the heavens. Her mom and dad would show her all the major constellations. It was one thing talking about the Milky Way but quite another to experience it live. Gazing out the window, she saw Earth and fell silent. The blue and green planet sparkled like the orb on all those screensavers she’d seen.

“Wow. Look at that,” whispered Mike, his voice filled with awe. “I’ve only seen pictures like this in books.”

“We’re hundreds of miles above your home planet,” said Thorn. “I marvel at its beauty every time.”

Casey’s mom had bought her a brand new canvas. She fell short of ideas after picking up the brush, spending hours on chasing her muse in her search for something her soul might have to express. But now, she felt her creative juices bubbling again inside, waiting to be released after all she’d seen. She couldn’t wait for the mission to be over and done with so she could return to her painting. Soon, she’d have stacks of portraits along the walls of her studio, the garage, the basement, the attic, and wherever else she could find a spot.

From the corner of her eye, something bumped and rolled against one of the windows. A black backpack floated across the room.

Mike tugged anxiously at his seatbelt. “That’s mine. I’ll get it.”

“Yes, but first, I want to show you something.” Thorn touched a silver button to the far left, and everything went dark. He pointed to the middle of the cockpit. A full-color, three-dimensional hologram of the Milky Way flickered into existence and filled the entire room. “Let’s zoom in on your solar system.”

Casey stared at the big, bright sun in the middle of the room, with all nine planets traveling in slow, circular paths around it. The hologram was complete with moons, comets, stars, and an asteroid belt. It was *way* better than the planetarium. She took off her shoulder harness and slowly lifted out of her seat, floating into the center of the solar system.

Countless pinpoints of light twinkled in the blackness of space. She gaped at the sight, her shark-tooth necklace floating in the weightless environment. As she tucked it neatly inside her uniform, she remembered Mike's words about what the shark tooth represented: Like him, she was a survivor.

Zero gravity. She'd heard astronauts talk about it before on television, but experiencing the floating-like-a-feather feeling for herself was beyond cool. She was sure she could get used to it. Smiling, she flipped and looked at Mike upside down. "So this is how the astronauts must feel. It's like swimming in a pool with no water."

They spun around in all directions. Casey turned somersaults and giggled like a little girl, and Mike did big double flips in midair.

"I'm going downstairs to check the propulsion system," called Thorn from below. "I'll be back."

Casey nodded, barely paying attention to him.

A tiny meteor changed course, heading straight for Mike's head.

"Watch out!" Casey yelled.

Mike tried to catch it, but it passed right through his hands. "It's just a hologram."

She put her finger through one of the shining stars, watching the picture distort around her hand. "I know. Just wanted to see your expression when you freaked out. You look so cute when you're scared."

"How would you know?" Mike winked. "You've yet to see that."

She let out a slight giggle. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have this hazy memory of a blond guy hanging from a glass sidewalk, shouting that he didn't want to die."

He laughed. "No, you've got the facts wrong, babe. That was my twin brother."

She swam long strokes to the middle of the blazing sun. "I didn't know you had one. Is he just as cute?" Bright yellow light bathed her, and 3-D particles and gases swirled around her like fog.

"You wouldn't like him. He's way too arrogant and self-centered."

"What?" She spun toward him. "Even more than you?"

"Without a doubt." Mike's eyes glinted as he raced over to be with her in the middle of the sun. He took her hands in his. For a moment, he regarded her in silence, his gaze connected with hers, and he took a deep breath. "You're so... wow. Just so beautiful. I can't take my eyes off you." He kissed her, his lips warm and soft.

It's funny what the right light will do for a person. She smiled, trying not to blush, but the tell-tale heat scorched her cheeks nonetheless. "I'm beyond flattered."

"You should be. Coming from me and all, it means a lot."

They were sharing such a beautiful moment, and then Mike had to stick his big fat foot in his mouth. She bit her lip and held back a remark. She wasn't going to let him ruin the moment. "Why, you've swept me off my feet, Michael Pierce."

He looked down and laughed. "That I have."

"I feel like I'm floating on cloud nine... literally."

Mike wrapped his arms around her waist and spun them through the zero gravity in a circle. "You take my breath away. I can't stop thinking about our first kiss." His finger trailed down her cheek, stopping on her upper lip.

"How was it?" Her heart fluttered, anxiously awaiting his reply.

"Magical," he whispered, cupping her face. His breath brushed her lips as he drew closer. "What did you think?"

"A..." Her voice broke. *Amazing*. Then again, what girl hadn't thought that about his kisses? What girl hadn't been led to believe they were his "perfect girl"? It was what he did, the game he played, and he was far too good at it. She cleared her throat and tried again. "You totally blew my mind. Nobody has ever made me feel that way. It's just... maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

His brows furrowed. "What makes you say that? I really thought we shared a moment."

"We did, or so I thought." She sighed, wondering if she should really say it. *Cosmo* always advised against confronting one's man, but if she didn't do it now, she might always remain a coward.

"Okay. So, uh...?" His beautiful green eyes stared into hers as he waited for an answer.

Drawing back a few inches, she peered at him. "What girl don't you share a moment with, Mike? I guess I came back to reality. Remember, I'm your best friend and know *everything* about you."

He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair.

She snorted. "Those words don't ring a bell? Remember back in the cave? You said the same thing to me." He was unbelievable if he thought his reputation wouldn't worry her.

He threw his hands up in the air. "So that's the big deal? You're worried about all the other girls I've dated? Come on, Casey. You know they didn't matter, none of them. I'm interested in you and nobody else."

Yeah, but for how long? She couldn't stop the nagging thoughts at the back of her mind. If they ever broke up, would she join the "none-of-them-mattered" category too? She turned away, her heart pounding. "Listen, this isn't the time to talk about this. Saving Earth is way more important than figuring out the future of our relationship." *Or lack thereof*. She rolled her eyes at the infuriating

thought. “We can talk about it more if we survive.”

He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. “And what if this is our very last conversation ever?”

She didn’t want to think about it, but he might have been right. “Then we’ve lost the opportunity forever.” She wanted him to believe she didn’t care, but she did deep down inside. If it really was their last chance, she might never find out what he truly felt. She stared at him for a moment, his skin aglow, his hair and face glistening from the yellow light. His hair flowed like an angel from the zero gravity. He was absolutely wow—absolutely beautiful, handsome, and gorgeous.

“You really wouldn’t care?”

When she didn’t answer, doubt crossed his face, followed by hesitation. He was just as insecure as she was—or maybe even more since he’d probably never experienced rejection, while she had. Every time she saw him with another girl, the moment pierced a hole in her heart. Hopefully, it wasn’t punctured beyond repair by now.

“I don’t believe that for a minute. You care just as much as I do.” He touched her cheek. “You know I want you in my life more than as a friend.”

No doubt, she’d love to have Mike as a boyfriend, and maybe it was the time to talk about it. He could put all of her doubts aside. She decided to get straight to the point. “Mike, are you trying to ask me what I think you’re asking? Do you want me to be your girlfriend?” She smiled at the thought. “Because nothing would make me happier.”

Mike leaned forward, pressing her body close. “I’m into you. You know that. I’d like to see where this goes.”

See where this goes? Her jaw dropped. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“You know I don’t make promises. There shouldn’t be any lies between us.” He lowered his voice. “All I know is I can’t stop thinking about you, and I want to take our friendship to the next level and see what happens.”

Casey took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. The sharp words cut her like a knife. She knew that would be the result, but the knowledge alone couldn’t fight the pain surging within her. She didn’t at all appreciate being treated like one of the dumb bimbos he picked up from the beach. Heat rushed across her face, making her cheeks burn. How dare him! She was more than that, and she deserved better. Surely, being his friend had to mean something. “Exactly how scared of commitment are you?” she asked.

“What?” He blinked, taken aback, and she knew she was right.

Stroking her hair, he said, “I’m not into the whole girlfriend thing, and it’s nothing to do with commitment phobia.”

She glared at him, a fake smile playing on her lips. *Cosmo’s right: Men don’t commit because they are always waiting for something better to come along. They just didn’t commit. Period.*

“I’ll tell you again, you’re all I think about, every hour of the day,” said Mike. “It’s like you’re in my head, and no matter how much I shake...” He shook his head to demonstrate his point. “...I can’t get you out.”

Boy, he loved to be theatrical, but she still believed him. He really was caught up with her, at least for the moment, but she was sure that sooner or later, that would stop when someone else invaded his mind. *Why can’t he just declare his undying love and ask me to be his girlfriend?* She stared into his bright green eyes and realized for the first time that she wanted something Mike could never give her—a monogamous relationship. Jack was right about Mike: He was a free spirit that couldn’t be tied down. He’d eventually resent her, and then their wonderful friendship would be shattered forever.

She nodded to herself as a light bulb switched on inside her head. Even if her heart screamed out for him, her mind knew better. Mike wasn’t *the one*. She’d cherish their friendship forever, but everything else was off limits. Sighing, she forced back the lump in her throat. Her tongue stuck to the cave of her mouth as she began to speak. “Listen...” She shook her head, unable to form the words. “We’ve shared a few wonderful kisses I’ll never forget, but that’s it. I’m sorry to say this’ll never go any further.”

“Wait.” Mike’s forehead wrinkled. “I don’t get it. I just told you I can’t stop thinking about you, and you’re brushing me off? Doesn’t it mean anything?”

She spun around, wondering whether Thorn really needed that long or whether he was just giving them time. Either way, having such an important conversation felt awkward and daunting. “It does, but...” She stopped again, peering at Mike, her heart aching while her mind screamed to finish what she’d started before it was too late. It was better to hurt his ego before he broke her heart. An ego like that could afford a few dents, and she was sure he’d find someone to mend it as soon as all this was over. But she might never find a guy to fill the punctures he’d left in her heart. She coughed to clear her throat. “Remember in *Pretty Woman* when Julia Roberts says, ‘I want the fairytale’? Well, she hit the nail on the head. That’s what I want too—all or nothing.”

“I’m giving you all I have to offer, everything. Just look at me and the way I act. You’ve known me my entire life. You knew I was broken when you came into this. So what makes you back off now?”

You don't have enough glue and tape to fix me?"

Clearly, he didn't get that she was so over watching and waiting. Taking chances had never been her thing, and with Mike, it wasn't a mere possibility that he'd drop her like a hot potato. He'd done it with stunning girls in the past. If those beauty queens couldn't even keep him, she was sure she had no chance. "You're wrong there. I've already been through hundreds of bottles of Elmer's glue and thousands of rolls of Scotch tape, and I'd gladly do it all over again if I had to, but that's not it, and you know it."

"Humans and their emotions," said Thorn.

Casey glanced down as Thorn turned off the hologram, the lights returning to normal. She'd been so engrossed in the Mike dilemma she hadn't even heard him return.

"It's time to get back in your seats. I'm turning on the artificial gravity." He flipped a switch.

"No, Thorn!" yelled Mike. "Not yet."

She was glad to be saved by the bell, as she didn't want to discuss the issue with Mike for another minute. Her arms and legs felt heavy as iron, and her mind wasn't in the best shape either. A *click* echoed to her right, and she went down with a *thud*, landing on her feet before stumbling to her knees.

Mike straightened and stepped closer. He held out his hand to help her up and then pulled her close. "There's something going on between us that you can't deny. I feel it, and so do you. We're both stressed out right now. I think you might need a little space, some time to think."

She pushed him away; she had already made up her mind. "Even if we get out of here alive, it won't change a thing." The fact that he considered her cute enough to kiss, but not worthy of being called *girlfriend* made her angry. In a bold moment, she stroked his cheek and whispered, "I hate to hurt you like this, but I feel ending it is the right thing to do."

He nodded as if he understood.

She hoped her heart would, too, in time. She turned away quickly to hide the sudden tears in her eyes.

The control panel beeped with flashing red dots, and a digital map flashed onto the screen. "I have the location of the mothership." Thorn leaned in toward the view screen. "We're about 10,000 kilometers away."

The silver giant ahead grew larger as they approached at great speed. Casey rushed to her seat and fastened the seatbelt, mumbling, "It looks like a huge, flying, stretched-out football with lights."

Thorn pushed up a glowing crystal. "Casey, hit the orange crystal on your left-hand side. That'll

transmit a distress trouble signal so they'll pull us up."

She followed his command and peered at him. "What now?"

Thorn's eyes narrowed in his stern face. "Now we wait and hope they'll fall for the plan."

Moments passed. Casey watched Mike's profile and wondered what he was thinking. Her heart ached as he caught her gaze and then quickly looked away. *Is he hurt because I rejected him? What if we both die?* She didn't want to face the very last moments of her life with Mike mad at her, and she began to wonder why she opened her big trap and put her foot in her mouth.

In a blaze of light, a yellow beam dropped from the underside of the humongous vessel. A massive jolt rocked the ship, banging Casey's head against the seat. She gasped. *Talk about a bad case of whiplash.* More brilliant light filled the cockpit, and she threw her hands up to shield her eyes. She could feel the powerful vibrations through her hands as she gripped the armrests. Even more vibrations shot up her legs. "What's going on?"

Mike's jaw dropped. "I don't believe it! We're being pulled up by some kind of tractor beam—you know, like in those sci-fi movies."

She fluttered her eyes open, and peeked out through the light. Giant octagonal doors on the bottom of the mothership slowly opened. She clutched the armrests even tighter, shivers coursing through her. This was *Star Wars* at its finest.

Thorn's voice rang through the cockpit. "Our plan's working! They're putting down their force field, opening the docking gates. Quick! Keep low and move to the back of the ship."

Casey let out a huff as sweat ran down her spine. She was about to enter an alien mothership. *Oh man! Not even Cosmo can cover this one. Speaking of relationship advice, was it really clever to dump a guy right before I face a possible execution?* She wiped her sweaty hands on her uniform pants and whispered, "Well, we're at the point of no return. I hope you'll remember I used to give you my toys and let you copy in elementary school."

"What?" asked Mike.

She shook her head as she unbuckled her belt and crawled on the floor toward Thorn. "Nothing. I just wanted to say that you're really a nice guy...uh, most of the time, and..." She gestured around. "Anyway, I'll cherish every minute I've ever spent with you. We'll pull this off together, right?"

Mike nodded as they exchanged nervous glances. His trembling hand reached out, and she clutched it eagerly, like a child. He gave her a reassuring squeeze, but she knew he was scared to death.

Casey gulped hard, goosebumps racing over her skin. She knew one thing for sure: Billions of

people were depending on their success, whether they knew it or not. They simply could *not* fail.

The sucking sound began as they were lifted into the giant vessel by aliens who wanted to destroy every human in the world.

To be continued...