

Agartha's Castaway

Book 2

in

The Trapped in the Hollow Earth Novelette Series

By

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For:

Faith and Matthew. I love you.

To:

My Father God in heaven.

To:

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

To:

My brilliant editor, Autumn J. Conley.

Book trailer for the series: http://youtu.be/viwTOM8Ms_g

Episode 2

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

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

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

"Yeah?" I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Refreshing, huh?" asked Mike.

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

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

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

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

He smiled.

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

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

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

"Nice compromise," I said.

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

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

"Girls?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whoa," said Jack.

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

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

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

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

Mike laughed.

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

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

"Wow!" I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"At this point, it could be anything."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, check this out!" called Jack.

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

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

"After prey?" I said.

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

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

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

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

I recoiled. "What?"

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

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

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

"Whatever this place is," whispered Jack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh, brother.”

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

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

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

He winked. “See? You do get me.”

“Yep, like nobody else.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shot me a cute grin.

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

We all burst out in laughter.

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

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

Mike shrugged. “Who cares?”

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

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

Mike grinned. “Elves?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

Jack let out a low laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe.”

He grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We all chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tinker Bell!" I said.

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

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

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

"It's...it's..." He gasped and faltered. "I dunno."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'd never do that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He chuckled. “Apology accepted.”

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

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

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

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

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

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