

Agartha's Castaway

By Chrissy Peebles

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For:

My husband, Alex.

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

My dad.

My sister, Sarah, and my brother, Joel.

For: anyone who dares to imagine...

Dedications:

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

* * *

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

Episode 1

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

-U.S. Army Ranger Handbook

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

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

“Hey, that’s our last bucket,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dance with Mike?” called back Jack. “No thanks, I’d rather put away our fishing stuff.”

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

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

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

Mike pointed up at a twinkling light in the Caribbean night sky. “Hey, what’s that?”

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

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

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

“Totally. It almost looks like a UFO.”

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

“No? What is it then?”

I shrugged. “I’ve no idea.”

“Why don’t we go ask our very own walking encyclopedia?”

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

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

He pulled me close. “I think it’s going to rain.”

I blinked. Overhead, a brilliant burst of light ripped across the sky. Thunder crashed. My pulse spiked as I broke Mike’s embrace and looked up at him, our eyes connecting. His forehead creased in a worried frown, and for a moment, I knew exactly what he thought: *No way do we*

want to be on a boat in the middle of the ocean with a storm gathering above our heads. We sprinted to the bow, where Jack and my parents waited.

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

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

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

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

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

Jack bolted after him. “Need any help?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I slowly made my way toward the cabin door. Just above me, another crack of thunder exploded. Goosebumps pimped my skin. There was more blindingly white light before the single streak of lightning broke into several branches. I breathed in and out deeply, hoping to

make it to the cabin. Once I was behind that door, I knew I would be okay. I had no doubt my father could steer *Wind Dancer* safely back to the island.

The boat lurched again. Sodas and chunks of ice from the open cooler shot past me, barely missing my head. Shivering, I shielded my face with an arm, clenching my teeth as I inched forward. *Almost there.* Stinging rain pounded down harder. I took one more brave step and slipped, falling on one knee. The pain surging up my leg made me bite my lip to stifle a scream. *No need to worry the others.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack's head whipped around, and he pointed toward the bow. "Over there."

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

"What?" said Mike, staggering backward. "Where's your dad?"

"He's in the wheelhouse," I shouted. "C'mon!"

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

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

Mike shook my shoulder, terror etched in his voice. "Crap! We're sinking."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I promise. I’ll look everywhere!” he shouted.

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

“I’ll send out an SOS,” I panted, my heart hammering.

A flash of lightning illuminated the night sky. I switched on the radio and picked up the microphone. I jumped when a violent clap of thunder cracked above me, as if someone had snapped a bullwhip just inches from my ear. With shaky fingers, I tuned in to Channel 16. My voice broke as I forced myself to speak. "Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is *Wind Dancer*. Can anybody hear me?" I gripped the receiver tightly with both hands. "Somebody, please answer!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

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

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

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

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

“Which island?”

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

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

Silence.

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

Still nothing.

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

Biting my lip, I tore away from him. I'd never acted like a damsel in distress before, and I wasn't going to start playing the role now. Did the *Silver Bullet* hear what island we were near before the radio died? Rescue couldn't waste valuable time searching around the wrong islands. My mom's life depended on that call; everyone's life depended on that precious communication.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inching nearer, Mike asked, “Help’s coming, then?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

He nodded. “What’re you looking for?”

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

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

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

Rescue. Warm blankets. Hot chocolate. Thank goodness. My mom and dad had to be on the helicopter, and I was sure they’d be waiting for me with a big smile. I let out a sigh of relief. A beam of light cut through the rain and filled the room, momentarily blinding me. “Ready to get

this rescue party started with some fireworks?" I dashed out the wheelhouse door into the furious storm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I glanced around in frantic disbelief but saw nothing but rising mountains of water. Gasping for breath, I tried not to choke on the salty foam being thrust into my mouth by the wild,

tumbling waves. I focused my attention back on Jack until he disappeared from view. Water rushed over my face. My eyes burned, and my vision blurred.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I coughed, exhausted, my body trembling with the effort to keep myself afloat. There was no way I was going to let the undertow drag me down. Around and around I spun, faster and faster. I tried to break free of the fast-spinning, churning water, but vast jaws of swirling foam swallowed me up. I felt the tremendous force of the water washing over me, pulling me in, deeper and deeper. Spiraling down to the center core of the mighty whirlpool, I was tossed,

turned, and rolled beneath the surface of the water. This was definitely not on my list of “Top 10 Things to Do in Fiji.”

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

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

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

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

“Casey! Over here!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack held me at arms’ length. “They were rescued. I saw them being pulled up into the air.”

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

Mike nodded. “Yep. I saw it too.”

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

Mike squeezed my hand. “You know it.”

I shot him a smile.

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

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

“Whoa!” Mike’s voiced echoed in the cave. “Check out the icicles.”

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

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

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

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