

Outback Heroes

Book 2

Joan of Shark



Shale Kenny

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Eight of my favorite inspirations for writing:

*C.J. and Jeremy
Natasha and Octavio
Taelah and Lucy
Grace and Joshua*

Shale Kenny

Some Australian Words...

agro.....angry, or aggravated
betcha... I bet you
bludger....a lazy person, who always wants someone else to do it
bog in....eat up
bonza.....great
carl (sounds like dark).... to die
chook.....chicken
chuffed...pleased with
cooe....(cooo-eeee)a long distance away
cop or **copped**....to catch someone in the act
crikey....an expression of surprise
crook....sick, or badly made
gives him 'currey'....to give someone trouble
doona.....a warm but light quilt
done a runner.....someone ran away
dunny (dun-ee).....an outside lavatory
fair dinkum (fair-dink-um).....genuine, true
feral (fair-el)....wild and unruly in appearance
fit as a mallee bull....a very fit and strong person
G'day (gid-day)....hello
gunna'....going to
to **'mag'**....to chat
rellies.....family relatives
ridgy-didge....original, genuine
ridic....ridiculous
smackeroos (smack-er-oo)....one dollar
smoko....a smoke or a coffee break
squizz....take a look at
strewth....an exclamation
tracky daks (track-ee-daks)..... tracksuit pants, or sweats
tucker.....food



"For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by mankind."

James 3:7

1

So, is this how it ends for me? Taken out by a heart attack in my high school cafeteria at age sixteen? It sure feels like a heart attack. I go staggering towards the chairs in the school lunch area, gasping for breath. I had the same symptoms when I went into Mom's bedroom a few nights ago, and couldn't wake her up. Panic. Perfectly understandable there. But what was to panic about just changing schools? I've changed schools before. And this isn't my first day.

Horrible name, Shark Heads. Gave me bad vibes right from the start.

Yet, my heart is thumping away—going a hundred miles an hour—and I've got this scary, tight feeling in my chest. Better sit down before I fall down. Can't breathe. Head is whirling. Am I losing it? How embarrassing to crack up the first week at school. Maybe I'm coming down with some incurable disease.

The two girls sitting on the other side of the long table look surprised when I fall heavily into the seat

opposite them. They're always together, "besties" as they say, and probably haven't even noticed me the past few days, anyway. Even though we have some of the same classes.

"Hi," I manage to squeak.

They nod in my direction then continue talking about their boyfriends. I have a boyfriend too, except he lives in Perisher Valley. But they probably wouldn't be interested, so I stay zipped. But at least I don't feel like I'm going to fall over in a dead faint, anymore. Maybe there's some kind of poison in the water everyone here knows about but me.

Shark Heads High—already I don't like it much.

"Where are you from, Joanie?" The one whose name I know is Rebekah, suddenly wants to talk.

"Perisher Valley." I take a deep breath. "In the Snowy Mountains." I snatch a sandwich from my lunchbox and try to at least look halfway normal even though I could be on the verge of dying, here. "We've been staying in town until we can move into our own place."

She doesn't comment.

"I'm more of an outback girl at heart, though." I manage a smile and press on. "I was brought up in Coober Pedy. But we had to move because of Dad's work."

"I've heard about Perisher Valley. People seem to

love it. Did you do any skiing?”

“No. My boyfriend took me on a couple of sled dog rides, though. He trains dog-teams for racing there.”

“That sounds wild.” Her friend, Katie, takes over. “And you like the outback better?”

My sandwich lies forgotten in front of me, I'm so happy to finally be talking to someone. “Massively. Even when it gets super hot in summer the outback is still better than the cold. Took me ages to adjust to those freezing winter days in Perisher Valley.” I'm breathing much easier now.

“Yuk. I'd pick cold over hot, any day.” Katie's mouth turns up in disgust.

“You sorta' get used to the heat,” I tell them. “And Coober Pedy is famous. It's where the crows fly backwards to keep the red dust out of their eyes.”

No reaction to that, so I keep talking. “My Mom didn't like the heat much, either. She was glad to be out of there when we had to move to Perisher. But at least we didn't have to leave the outback before we got to experience something weirdly epic.”

They both stop eating and wait for me to go on.

“What did you experience that was so weirdly epic?” Katie crumples up her empty sandwich wrap without even looking at it.

I love telling this part. “Dad bought an underground home from a miner.” Now, that ought to rock their boats

because it's totally cool.

Instead, they exchange looks like I might be from another planet.

“How gross!” It was Rebekah this time. “I can't imagine living in a dumpy old coal mine. Everything all black and filthy.”

“It was an opal mine, actually—not a coal mine. A lot of opal miners live underground. It's an awesome life. We had a kitchen, a lounge room, and two bedrooms. It wasn't dumpy, at all. I even had a piano. Coming home from school down a ladder was pretty amazing, too. Kinda' like entering the land of outback Oz, you know?”

There I go again. Every time I meet someone new I always have to establish what's different about me rather than what's alike. Guess I've got something against everyone talking and acting like clones.

“How long did you live in Perisher Valley?” Katie tips her head to one side when she asks, with a well-practiced shake that ripples her long blonde curls .

All at once, I'm tired of explaining things. Next thing you know I'll be telling them what it's like to live with a mad scientist for a dad, and really alienate myself. Pretty sure they weren't ready for that. Most kids aren't too interested in medical research, anyway, so I usually keep that information to myself. Stick with the simple stuff, I always say. For sure, enough with the stories.

“We only spent a year in Perisher Valley.”

Rebekah gives an exaggerated sigh. “You had to move after only one year? Oh, aren't parents the absolute limit? I mean, 'newsflash,' this is grade twelve. We can quit school and get a job if we want to, so, the very least your folks should do is to let you settle down somewhere.”

Then they both stand up and walk off all of a sudden—like someone gave a signal. Not two feet away they start laughing. They haven't even bothered to say, “See ya'.”

“Okay, head up, shoulders back.” I remind myself when I finally start out to the car pickup area. At least all those weird symptoms are gone.

Shark Heads High is set right in the middle of a small seaside village, and from where I'm standing on the footpath, I can look down the main street. Mostly all heritage buildings. The old post office and the Coach Company office, for example.

It's situated on the east coast of Australia, south of Sydney, and has always been a popular fishing destination. Population only a couple thousand, or so Dad says. Dairy farmers and fruit growers mainly, a real casual town, too, because no-one dresses up in Shark Heads. The climate here is not as hot as Coober Pedy, and certainly not as cold as Perisher Valley. Sweet. Plus there's lots of rain— which is probably why the main street of town has to be seen to be believed.

The whole length of it is lined with giant trees. Poinciana, and spreading Jacarandas. I have to look again to see I haven't imagined it. But, no. The two types of trees intermingle, meeting together in the middle to form a canopy of striking red and purple blooms. Spectacular.

Looking up at the mountains, just beyond, I love the way they appear to stand so solid behind the town, as though to protect it from the frequent, heavy east-coast lows. Those lows dump as much torrential rain on it's residents as they can—or so the locals say. That's one thing I do love about this place—even if it's the only one. Living in a world of green is so awesome.

Most of the businesses are home-grown—no large shopping malls or traffic lights even, and you never catch more than one or two folk crossing the street at the same time. Having been born in the outback, and later experiencing Perisher Valley, I'm really into the quiet contentment of small-town living. All that green is so relaxing, plus I see pawpaws, pineapples and what I've discovered to be the most delicious mangoes in the world, just begging to be eaten.

By the time Mom and Dad drive up, I'm cool with things, again. Mom grins through the open car window. She has the most gentle smile, soft gray eyes and pretty brown hair. Perfect posture, left over from her more active days, and this special air of refined elegance

which accentuates her ample curves. Somehow, her inside beauty covers up her outside flaws. “How was school, dear?” she asks.

“Fine.” I tell her, even though it wasn't quite that good. “How come you two wanted to pick me up, today?”

Suddenly I spot Laney Evans (from history class) crossing the road right in front of our car and call out, “See ya' Laney!” and give her a wave. But what does she do in response? She sprints across the street, preferring to almost get herself mowed down in the process rather than answer anything back. Am I invisible to these kids?

“One of your classmates, Joanie?” Dad asks.

I nod, biting my lip and blinking furiously to quell the tears. I've never been so emotional over this kind of stuff before. What's the deal? The last thing I want to do is bother my parents about it. They have enough on their minds, already. Besides, at sixteen, I should be taking care of my own problems.

“Your father has a big surprise for us, Joanie.” Mom's always happier when Dad's around. The phrase sets me to mentally hash-tagging the word surprise though, because Dad's surprises have a way of turning out to be disasters, sometimes.

I settle myself into the back seat and focus on the top of his bald head. Half bald, that is. Which he makes up for by letting the other half grow wild between haircuts.

Thick, black curls hang halfway to his shoulders. With the window open, wind assistance makes him look more like a nutty professor than usual. All of which I have stopped trying to explain a long time, ago.

“Oh, my gosh, Dad,” I groan, as we leave the town behind us. “You haven’t got us living in the sticks again, have you? I sort of wanted to be closer to everything, this time.” Which I already know isn’t going to happen because I’m seeing fewer houses and more trees all the way. A sedated affect seems to have come over my parents. Neither of them have been the same since Dad’s research partner disappeared into thin air last year.

We’ve all dealt with it in our own peculiar ways. Dad’s typical days or week-long absences turning into weeks or a month. Of course he was left with having to train an assistant to help with some of the work but it wasn’t the same. Mom goes into a slump whenever he’s away too long, especially without Ted to do a big portion of the field work. He’d been with us so long he was more like part of the family than just a work colleague. He was actually the first one to get me interested in marine biology.

The police have pretty much given up on the case since it has been nearly a year but I don’t believe anyone disappears without a trace. Neither do they, really, it’s just they don’t have enough time or manpower to keep up with cold cases. Which is why Riley and I started

looking into it on our own. And now that we had actually moved to the place Ted had last been doing most of his work, I really had the feeling we would finally get lucky with at least one of our leads. But it wasn't going to help to be living who-knows-how-many miles outside of town.

"Dad," I lower my voice. "I know we need to live close to the right hospitals with the right equipment—as well as the labs here. I get it—really I do. But I wish you'd remember that I'm kinda' shy. It'll be harder to make new friends if we live remote."

Mum turns around with a worried look on her face. "You're not having problems at school, are you, Joanie?"

"Problems? Me?" I reach over to run a hand across the shoulder of her flower print dress to change the subject. "The new dress looks nice, Mom."

"Glad you approve It is nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Goes good with your twinkly eyes and elegant hairdo."

She felt the back of her clip to make sure all the brown strands were still tucked under. "Thought I'd put it up since it's a special occasion."

"So..." I take in the palm trees and beaches we're zipping past. "Exactly how far is it to this place?"

"Fifty minutes tops," Dad promises. Then he finds a good song on the radio and starts singing along happily.

Mom doesn't seem to be the least concerned that we're in the middle of nowhere—no stores and hardly any homes. In fact, she starts to sing along with Dad. But after a while she gets tired and leans back in her seat for a nap. Something she's been doing a lot, lately.

There is something totally relaxing about a drive, though, and I nearly fall asleep, myself, before my phone rings. No-one much calls me except Riley, so I'm not surprised to see his name pop up on the screen.

"Hi, Riles." I whisper into the phone. "Dad's taking us to see our new place and you wouldn't believe where it is."

"Almost there, love." Dad half turns to reassure me, so I know he's heard. He doesn't know anything about us looking for Ted and would probably hit the roof if he knew some of the scrapes we'd gotten into because of it.

Riley just laughs. My boyfriend understands my father well—they've spent plenty enough time together when Dad was trying to pick up on some of Ted's field work and he needed someone local to take him into the rainforests around Perisher Valley.

"Give it a chance, Jo." he says to me. "I'll drive down this weekend to check it out, if you like."

My spirits lift. Riley here for the weekend? Suddenly I'm more optimistic, too.

"Are you legal to drive this far, Rye? I mean, that would be awesome but I don't want you to take risks."

“Yep. Just turned seventeen, so everything's cool. Anything you haven't told me yet?”

“Later.” I promise. “Dad's finally slowing down so we might be close. Maybe we'll have some friendly neighbors but at the moment I don't see any neighbors at all. I miss all the kids from the church youth group. Say hello to them for me, will you?”

“You betcha. But there's probably a youth group in Shark Heads, somewhere, Jo. Just ask around. And don't worry about the house. Remember, the great place he found in Perisher Valley and how you ended up loving it there? So, if your Dad chose this one, you'll probably love it, too.”

“True. But the best part about that one was you and I were neighbors. Remember how we met on the school bus the very first day? I bet Shark Heads doesn't even have a bus service this far out.”

I lean forward to interrogate Dad. “Where are we now?” I ask. “The Amazon? This area looks totally feral.”

“Chill, Jo.” I hear Riley say into my ear. “What do you want to bet he comes up with something awesome.”

Men! They always stick together.

“Ya' think? Hey— we're turning into a driveway and—I can see the beach! Riles, you're not going to believe this. We just pulled up outside a three-story, place that could double for a prehistoric castle! I'll have to get back

to you later. Bye!”

When Riley hangs up, I lean forward, again. “This is it?”

The man nods happily.

“Is it supposed to be a lighthouse? It looks kinda' like an old English castle on stilts, too. What do you think, Mom?”

She's looking, but I can tell she's trying hard to stay upbeat.

“Yes,” Dad finally admits, “It's a very old lighthouse. Hasn't been used as one for years. The elderly owner hardly touched a thing during all that time, so, we should have fun exploring.”

I stare at my father. Unable to think of how to answer that one.

“I know it's a little isolated, Joanie, but wait until you see all of it.”

Mom nods enthusiastic agreement, already opening her door to get out. She always agrees with him. I think even if he went insane, she'd go with him there, too.

“It's too far away from school.” Maybe a mention of my education will sway him.

“The bus ride will be worth it, believe me.”

“And I bet we're the only humans out here.”

He laughs. “Not quite. Trust me, you ladies will absolutely love it.” By this time, he's out of the car, unlocking the front door to our new adventure. “Here's

the living room. Genuine antique furniture and a cozy stone fireplace. Great, eh? Big enough to hold a dance in here.”

Only for anyone who could afford the plane fare this far out, I think to myself. I glance over at Mom, who looks kinda' sleepy again, but that can't be right. She had a nap in the car. As for what she thinks about the house—she could never like this bizarre tower, could she? It's beyond creepy. That's when it hits me that—once, again—I've become a storm-rider in their latest nightmare.

Exactly when was it that my parents and I switched places?

2

Ok, quit it! I tell myself. This kind of thinking is what triggers that panicky feeling and the last thing I want to do is drop dead in front of my parents. They may have been beamed down from the Twilight Zone but I love them. Even though that would make me their alien spawn—so that's another worry.

“Dad, we can't live in a lighthouse. It's too weird and too far away from everything.” I attempt to sound firm and decisive.

But he's already headed up the old English staircase which sweeps around to the second level. “Come on ladies, wait till you see the bedrooms.”

So much for my firmness. I follow along obediently, picturing an imaginary conversation I could be having with a new friend. Want to come to my place, after school? We probably couldn't get you back before midnight. Oh, this is a horror story.

I decide to change tactics. “Actually, Mom, I suppose the steps could turn out to be an advantage for

us. Good exercise.” How like my father to factor in Mom's size when he chose this place. After all, Mom is overweight and he is a doctor. Although his specialty is medical research, where his patients are either animals, or people who have willed their bodies to science. A grossly revolting practice, in my opinion.

“What do you think of our bedroom, my love?” He opens a door into a large, old-style, furnished room as I stay zipped, praying Mom will hate it.

“A king-sized bed! Oh Patrick, we've been wanting of those for years but they never seemed to fit the layout before.” As usual she finds something to be enthusiastic about. Life with them is an unfathomable mystery, sometimes.

“Take a better look.” Dad stands with arms crossed, like he's one of the royal family, while I feel amazed all over, again, at how they always have each others backs. They never seem to disagree on anything. Either that, or they spend a lot of effort keeping it from me.

“A window seat, too. Thank you darling, I love it!”

Have to admit I'm intrigued by the window seat. Might be fun watching whales migrate North. So I stroll up behind my mother and get blown away. “Wow! We're so close to the sea I can just about dive in from here.” I couldn't help blurting out, though still a bit horrified I may already be joining them in their madness. But I can't help myself.

“And there's more.” Dad opens the far door and we all troop out onto the balcony.

“It's divine.” Mom says. “The three of us can have afternoon tea out here.”

“Not me. I'll be on that beach getting an awesome suntan and swimming. Is this place really all ours, Dad? And that fair dinkum private beach comes with it?”

“You betcha it does! I know how lonely my girls get when I'm out of town so much.”

My own beach right outside our back door? Hmmn. Maybe I was a little hasty.

“Allow me to escort you to your room, Joanie. Better close your eyes. You should be all the way inside to get the full effect.” Dad drags me along behind him like he's just invented Vegemite or something, so I'm wired as he leads me on. He's the all-time expert at surprises—no doubt about that.

“Well, what do you think?” I hear him ask.

But I bump into something furry before I open my eyes and scream blue murder. “What—what's this hideous thing?”

“A stuffed fruit bat! Not near as dramatic as the sharks you like so well but—”

“Twice as ugly.” I put a hand to my head as I watch it still swinging from the wire it's suspended from. In fact, the whole room seems to be on tilt.

“Might take you a while to adjust to your room being

right on the curve.” Dad’s never far from his observation skills. “Maybe even give you a peculiar spacial sensation.”

I’m wondering how he even noticed. “Well—can you at least dump that creepy bat thing in the trash, or something?”

“I can’t dump it, love. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to stuff the thing. It’s a magnificent specimen. But if you insist, I’ll take it up to the attic.” He gets out the multi-tool he always carries in his pocket and snips off the wire.

An attic, too? I can only imagine what might be up there.

“Are you sure it’s dead?” I ask when he passes. “Look, the fangs are dripping with blood.”

“Such attention to detail,” he marvels. “There’s even a few insects glued onto the fur. I think I’ll put him in my office.”

Mom grabs my arm. “You’ve got a balcony, too,” she interrupts our banter and hustles me off. Always the peacemaker.

“Yes. It’s a fantastic view, and I can’t wait to go for a swim!”

A look of alarm crosses her face.

“Or a walk,” I correct myself. “Hey, let’s go check out the closet space.”

We head back inside, then both crack up when we

realize there isn't one. Only a beautiful hand-carved wardrobe that matches the bedposts.

"It looks comfy enough, dear." She sits down on the mattress a moment to test it out. "And just think what it will be like to wake up to the sound of the surf every morning."

"Oh, Mom—to actually live on the beach—it will be absolute heaven!"

So, when Dad gets back we all head outside and down the stone steps to look at it. They have been cut into the natural curve down the cliff face which forms the foundation for our strange new home.

"Careful" he warns. "Some places are rather sharp, but isn't it all stunning? And look over there. Our own private dock."

By now, I feel more like I'm walking through a painting that used to hang on our wall. Because up until now, I've only dreamed about places like this.

"A rowboat? Patrick, you haven't—well, I never!"

"Now Edna-May, just trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Dad, have you flipped? Mom can't row a boat."

"She will be able to, eventually. Come on."

Next thing I know, he's introducing us to the small tinny, and takes Mom's hand to help her step into it for a few minutes. Dad might just be on a winner this time because she does need a new interest since he's had to be

gone so much lately, and it would be awesome if she took up rowing. He shows her where to sit, and introduces her to the anchor and oars. All at once, I feel a sudden surge of tenderness for my parents and wish I hadn't trashed the dream house so quickly.

"Before we go back inside, I want you both to look way up to the top. See that? You can still see the old light up there."

"Looks like our old painting," Mom says in a dreamy sort of way.

"Remember Edna-May, we always said we would like to live in a lighthouse like that, someday."

"I remember that was when we were very young." She smiles.

"I can't wait to tell Riley we'll be living in a lighthouse." I'm totally won over to it now. I'm still sane enough to realize it isn't practical but nothing is ever too way out for Dad. There aren't many people that have lived underground for years, either. I swear, my father would agree to live on an alien spaceship if it seemed a good idea at the time. No surprise it takes me so long to find something in common with other kids every time we move.

"How do I get to school from here?" Even as I'm saying those words I feel a crazy chuckle building up inside. This has to be as nutty as it gets, but leave it to my Dad to make even the freaky sound fabulous.

“You can either catch the bus two blocks away, or take the rowboat to the main jetty which exits near the bus stop. Fifteen minutes of strong rowing. Wonderful exercise.”

“That ought to go down well with my teacher. 'Sorry I'm late, Miss. My boat sprung a leak this morning.' Maybe I could swim to the bus stop.” That's when I see my father's usual smile fade and his eyes take on a look of concern.

“Only joking, Dad. Don't look so worried. Okay, who's on third?” I crane my neck up as I throw him his favorite comedy line. My dad is a nut but I love him. Except why is he so quick to veto stuff, lately? He knows I'm a strong swimmer.

“Joanie,” he finally admits, “I'd prefer if you went rowing instead of swimming, at first. At least for a short while.”

I open my mouth to object—then, catching the genuine concern in his eyes—I shut it again without saying a word. Truly a rare event.

“You see there's been a few recent...uh... unfortunate incidents involving sharks. I didn't hear about them until after I bought this place. Seems people swim behind nets around here, so, I'll have to look into that.”

Behind a net? Go rowing instead of swimming? What is he trying to tell me? It's not like he doesn't know

what my life's ambition is. How could he expect anything else when he's given his life over to science, himself? We've had dozens of talks about it.

“Don't get upset.” He's reading me, again. “I'm not saying no entirely. I'm told sharks usually migrate north during winter, too, so it's safer to swim then. And with a few of the proper precautions—nets, cages and so forth—whatever you need to make things safe for you here, you should be able to carry on your research without any problems. In the meantime, you and Mom will have heaps of fun in the boat. I'm sure Riley will enjoy it when he comes for a visit, too.”

Yes, I dutifully agree. Only because he doesn't understand how important it is to me, yet. But inside I know sharks won't keep me out of this water. Because it has suddenly become perfectly clear what my first research project should be. I—Joanie Thomas—am going to learn how to share the ocean with sharks. On their terms. Maybe even get them to accept me.

What better way to prove they aren't mindless killers?

3

The next day, I enter the classroom for our history lesson, with a guy named Gideon following behind me. I remembered his name because it sounded like something out of the Bible. Mrs. Slade wasn't there yet, and everyone was taking their time settling in. Gideon is tall, with broad shoulders, and muscles that threaten to burst through the sleeves of his school uniform. Riley would kill for muscles like that, I know. But I figure muscles would have to be a requirement for someone on the wrestling team.

"How's things, Joanie?" he pauses at my desk.

"Things are okay, thanks. Have you lived in Shark Heads all your life, Gideon?"

He's looking down at me, fiddling with the knot in his tie as if it's too tight.

"Nah. Originally from the outback. I'm boarding with a church family in town until I graduate."

"Are your family Christians? Is that why you've got

a Biblical name?”

He nods. “Copped a lot of flack over my name but that's okay.”

“I've been looking forward to this history lesson, have you?”

“I am now.” he teases, then goes all serious on me. “All kidding aside, with the direction I want to take in life, a good education is important. No matter how far away you have to go to get it.” He flops casually down into the empty seat beside me, as though he's settled in for the lesson, although I know his books are at his own desk, further to the back of the room.

“I was raised in the outback, too,” I tell him. “Then we moved to the Snowies. Now we're here. We've had to relocate a couple of times because of Dad's work.” I look around the partly-filled classroom, then back to Gideon. “Where is everyone? Isn't history a mandatory subject?”

“They'll turn up, eventually. Most of them will probably drag in a little late, though. I gotta' admit history wasn't high on my favorite list either, until lately.” He gives me a mischievous chuckle and I notice he's got a killer smile to go along with everything else that's working for him.

“I love history,” I admit. “Books, movies...anything to give me a feel for what it was like to live back then.”

“More the outdoor type, myself. Never had a TV at home, anyway. Maybe you know what it's like to be a

poor outback country kid, Joanie. Lucky to have a roof over our heads and a full belly most of the time, right? Which is why we often end up under-educated. So, I'll need a degree to become a social worker. I intend to put everything I've learned to good use in the outback."

"Cool. By the way, would you happen to know if there are any church youth groups in the area? We had such awesome weekly meetings in Perisher Valley." I suddenly notice how easy it is to talk to Gideon. No stress involved. Like I've known him forever, or something. At least one person in Shark Heads seems to like me.

"Really? That's what I want to get started here." he says. "I should connect you up with my girlfriend, Grace. She wants to help, too. You two might have a lot in common."

"Game on! Good practice for when you want to organize something like that for outback teens one day, too."

"With you on that. Better get back to my seat, here's Mrs. Slade."

"Nice talking to you, Gideon." I watch him head across the room, wondering what his girlfriend might be like. Someone nice if she's anything like him. Maybe Shark Heads High won't be as hard as I thought to deal with, after all.

Mrs. Slade is delving into some books as I sit there,

which gives me time to take a better look around the room a bit. Several large posters of Joan of Arc pasted on the walls, that weren't there yesterday. She's obviously gone to a lot of trouble preparing for today's lesson. My eyes are riveted to the best one, and a shivery sensation runs through me. I admire the beautiful close-up of Joan's face. Such character in that profile. Strength and resolve like I've never seen before. Her features are delicate, yet strong. But her hair. Talk about a basin-cut. Her glossy, dark hair must have been stunning before it was hacked short. Yet, the cruel slashing only adds fire to the depth of her dark eyes.

In the painting, she is sitting side-saddle on her horse - back rigid, with an army of men behind. Right away I'm hooked. I love how the artist has managed to capture her fierce determination. Somehow, it makes me determined to get some of my own spirit back, again. Moving to a new school seems to have toppled my usual confidence. Who knows—maybe a study of Joan's life will turn a light on for me somehow.

All at once, I notice the teacher is watching me. “Impressed?” she asks.

“Oh, yes. What an amazing woman she was. Totally intriguing.”

“I agree. There is no way history would ever forget Joan of Arc. This artist has captured the fire inside her, too. These are only enlarged copies of drawings done a

long time ago, but in my opinion they show the very essence of Joan's fearless character."

I nod in agreement. Whatever it is, the images have me spellbound. As if I am truly gazing on the face of one of the world's youngest and bravest heroines, and—am I just imagining it? Those eyes actually look as if they are alive and trying to communicate with me.

"Now, Class." Mrs. Slade speaks firmly at full volume. A bit startling considering she's small, with quite the short haircut, herself, and an enormous set of brown eyes of her own. "Today I want to challenge you to imagine how you would manage if you were Joan's age, and possessed the same vision she had for her country. There would be very little to help you. All transport is by horse. Electricity, electronic communication, all belong to the future. Remember, in the fifteenth century, many things we take for granted haven't even been invented yet. Women were treated as second-class citizens. So, how do you think she was able to complete such a fantastic mission?"

A few moments go by and no one has answered the question, yet. But as if it were merely a continuation of our conversation, I speak up before I've barely got my hand in the air. "Mrs. Slade, if women were so poorly regarded in those days, how was Joan even able to get the attention of Kings and Armies, much less make them obey her?"

“You're about to find that out, Joanie. The story of Joan of Arc is mystifying to everyone who studies it. How could these things be? Especially since she was only in her early teens when it all started. In her own words she tells us that God, Himself, was urging her to join the army.”

I remembered that from a brief mention in history class last year, and it was one of the things that had totally captivated my attention back then, too. In fact, I'm sure the idea of such bravery is what influenced me to be so totally committed to solving the mystery of our two families that Riley and I had become so caught up in. It made me wonder if people so long dead could still have the power to influence others. And if that was so...

“France, her homeland, was being invaded by the British,” the little teacher's big voice jolted me back to the present, again. “And Joan's mission was to convince her own people that, if they wanted to win, she must be the one to lead them into battle.”

Sarcastic mumbles all around me.

“Imagine her parents' reaction, class.” Mrs. Slade challenged in response. “Could you go home and announce to your family that you intended to lead an army into war? Especially if you were a girl?”

I flip impatiently through the assigned reading, wanting more information, more drawings. Anything! Emotions surge deep within me. Strange, but in some

crazy way I'm convinced that I will find a way to draw from The Maid's strength. That's what they called her. The Maid. Did the Lord really speak to her, or was it voices from somewhere else?

Suddenly I find myself wondering if it was the Lord stirring these feelings up in me, too. Knowing how I need some extra backbone in my own life, right now, maybe. Could be that this ordinary school assignment might actually be an answer to my prayers. The ones about how bored and lonely I've become since moving away from Perisher Valley.

And Riley.

"Joan runs off to join the army, only to find that the army has no use for women." Mrs. Slade strolls to the back of the room, oblivious to the fact she is changing my life as she speaks. Naturally, I know the awful truth of how Joan's earthly path ended, but I don't let myself think about that, just now. Maybe in this study of her short but brave life, I might find some secret to the bravery I need in my own.

Maybe it would even help me to believe in my own heart a little more and trust I was created for a destiny, too. Yes, I need to remember that. It's so cool that we even share the same name. I'm told I was named for a famous opera singer, though—not history's most unique and courageous soldier.

"Well, I hope I've left you hungry to learn more

about Joan's life." Mrs. Slade's voice breaks into my thoughts, again. "And you're in luck class. I've checked out all the copies of Joan of Arc from the local library. Hands up who wants one. Better make up your minds in a hurry, because I only have six."

She waves one of the books in the air, and I run to claim it before anyone else even raises their hand. "I want one, please!"

Okay, occasionally the outback hick side of me shows up. But it does get me a book. Have you ever experienced a changing moment in your life? That's how I felt as I flipped through the book. Like it was the bestselling novel of all time.

"What would she advise if she was here?" I mutter to myself as I get up to leave with the others.

Joanie Thomas, I continue the pep-talk in my mind as I walk to the bus, return to your first love. Marine Biology. What about all the research into the habits of your ocean friends? You were going to delve deeper into it now you live at the beach. Quit stressing over situations you have no control over, and get back to studying your sharks!

When I get home, I check in on Mom but she's sleeping, again. I've come to believe maybe it's her way of handling things when Dad goes off to do his field work somewhere. Then, again, maybe it's about time I try and find out why she has turned into Sleeping Beauty,

lately. I'm good at solving mysteries. I proved that back in Perisher. Except it isn't so easy when the mystery involves your mom. Your own shaky emotions get tangled up in it. Still—if I'm going to be brave—I might as well start at home.

Which doesn't exactly feel like home, yet, so I set out to find some spot to relax and think in. The attic, maybe. Something a lot less creepier than it sounds because that's where the old light of the original lighthouse resides, which is surrounded by windows that look out over the sea. Bright and cheery, actually. And incredibly peaceful. Of course it's filled with all manner of trunks, old furniture and the kind of stuff people should throw away but never do.

So, I decide to move things around a bit and make myself a sort of nest to retreat to during times like this. For now, I want to take some undisturbed time to pour over my Joan of Arc book. Which I have to set aside long enough to move some things out of the way and clear off a dark blue overstuffed chair with a matching ottoman to put my feet up on. I set it next to the windows looking out over the sea. Not far from the huge lamp, that is still kept in its original stand. Dad thinks this old lamp is the very one the former lighthouse keeper used to guide ships to safety.

I click the switch, and a bright beam of light suddenly shines out over the ocean that is beginning to

bend into the twilight. My gosh, I may just have resurrected a life-saving device! So, right then and there, I make a new declaration. Every day at sunset, I, Joanie Thomas, pledge to light this lamp. Because it's entirely possible that, even today, it could still help guide lost ships to safety.

But I still need some more décor. So when I spot a large hamper against the rounded back wall, I immediately set to dumpster diving. Mostly olden-day clothing. And if it wasn't for the fact that my thoughts were filled with Joan of Arc all afternoon, I reckon I might have missed what I believe I was destined to find. Nothing like the steel armor Joan wore, of course, but the army camouflage uniform I latched onto was nothing less than modern day battle combats. Probably the only ones I'd be likely to get my hands on. Anyway, I couldn't resist trying them on before trudging over to a full-length mirror, leaning against the wall a few feet away, to see how I looked.

“Well, Mrs. Slade,” I say out loud, “you were the one who told us to try to imagine what it was like to be in Joan’s shoes, and I’m about ready to find out.”

Snatching up my book, I flip through the pages until I come to the best drawing of Joan in her armor. In this one she's holding a banner. Farther on, I find one of her holding a sword.

Every time she led her soldiers into battle, they won.

And, after a while, the generals only had to see her show up and they would put her in front to lead the charge. How amazing is that? Then I get another crazy idea. I've had long, black, curly hair for most of my life. In fact, I've been quite proud of it. It's the one aspect of my appearance I felt even came near to being pretty.

Joan's hair was black, too, but hers was cut in that old-fashioned basin style, that went out with Adam. What am I thinking? Well, maybe changing my hairstyle is what it will take to discard my old vanities. And while I may not look anything close to invincible, I'm starting to believe that, from this moment on, I can do practically anything I set my mind to.

Which is why, when I spot a pair of scissors on top of a sewing table, my mind is already made up. Without even thinking twice I start cutting, trying to keep as even as possible all the way around. My curls keep wanting to tuck under, though. Same with the fringe in front—no way they will lay as severe and straight as Joan's—but I do my best. When I clean up the mess and finally flop down on the blue chair, I actually feel excited. Because, except for those unruly curls...I'm a dead ringer for Joan of Arc.

Suddenly, I feel like I'm poised on the brink of a strangely compelling idea. Is it possible to connect to people of the past this way? Is it really possible to learn something from them after they're gone? And what will

Riley think about all these changes?

Take a chill pill, Joanie, I tell myself. You've come up with another wacky idea, that's all. Nothing you could ever do would be too way out for Riley. He's always got your back. Still, I better warn him about my new look before he actually sees it. As for my own test of courage—I know just what that has to be, now. And I can start tomorrow, after school. If my idea succeeds it will be all the proof I need to stand up for something more important than myself in this world.

On the other hand, it could have me dancing with death if it doesn't.

4

It's late afternoon by the time the school bus delivers me home next day. But that's okay. I change into my swimsuit, then head for the beach. School today was awesome! I learned heaps about marine biology—even checked out the library. There I found photos of the three main types of sharks known to be in this area, and spent as long as I could studying them—an absolute necessity. Especially since the test I had set myself was to swim with them in the ocean every day. For as long as it takes to prove my theory.

Oh, I am so glad Dad bought the lighthouse.

My studies reveal that there are mainly Bull Sharks, Great Whites, and Tiger Sharks in this area, and I'm keen to know everything about them. Especially information that proves they are more than just “eating machines.” Specifically the Bulls. All Sharks are an important part of the ocean's environmental cycle, and we humans simply can't keep slaughtering them just so we can feel safer in recreation areas. I know this. Now, I just have

to convince others.

So, here goes.

The track down to our beach is rough in bare feet, so I slip on a pair of sandals before heading outside. Dad's still at work and Mom's taking an afternoon nap—which gives me a twinge of guilt when I realize I have subconsciously timed things that way. But one glance at the ocean and I'm hooked. At the bottom, I kick off my sandals and the sand is clean, white, and deliciously warm as I step onto it. One miniature wave races up to greet me and I spot a few larger relatives right behind it, plowing their way to shore from the wild turbulence beyond.

How could my father bring me to this amazing place—especially knowing marine biology is my chosen field of study—then suddenly decide it should be out of bounds to me? Not that I'm usually one to disobey my parents. It's just that I decided a long time ago I would not let their overprotective ideas toward their only child keep me from what I most want to do in life. So far, it's been small things which were important to me that I hadn't minded giving in on. But this is different.

This one I'm going to have to prove before I even bring up the subject.

The cool water feels delicious and I stand there mulling it over as I peer out to the horizon. What I'm trying to catch sight of is a fin slicing through the water.

My senses are on high alert but I'm not one scrap afraid. Because all of my recent studies have led me to a hunch. The kind that could possibly lead to a theory, which might—just might—lead to the kind of substantial data that would prove it.

Are all sharks our enemy? Research shows that question is mainly a matter of understanding their common behaviors. The things that do—or don't—trigger the striking instinct. Mostly I'm wondering if it's actually possible to become some distantly acceptable participant in their territory. If sharks and humans might someday recognize each other as non-threatening. Could they ever become willing to share the ocean with us? Always at a respectable distance, of course.

If it's one thing my scientific father has ingrained in me, it's to respect nature. And to test every concept and theory. Who says sharks are nothing but deadly, flesh-eating marauders? Anyway, that's my theory. I realize living in a town called Shark Heads isn't exactly going to help my cause. In fact, I've learned there are several commercial companies based here that are specifically occupied with keeping down the shark population. Culling. Oh, how I hate that word! But maybe there's something I can do about that, too. Several scientists have already proven the need to protect certain species, and in order to do this, we must change how we treat them. So, I'm good with that.

By this time, I'm ankle deep in water, and accidentally dislodge a piece of driftwood, which gets picked up by the tide and sucked way out deep. My eyes stay riveted on the driftwood for a few minutes, enjoying the way it bobs along the top of the waves, and I long to join it.

Lifting my arms above my head, I peel off my T shirt to enjoy my first swim. "Come on, then," I challenge myself out loud. "What are you waiting for? Scared you'll see a Great White cruising this close to shore?" I laugh, but the pounding of surf drowns out my laughter. "You're a strong swimmer. " I'm talking to myself, again. "But it's going to take more than strength to do what you're thinking about. It's going to take courage. The kind Joan of Arc had. Have you got what it takes to really be like her? She faced death every time she went into battle." Then I think of Mrs. Slade. Because if this isn't putting myself in Joan's shoes, I don't know what is.

It's low tide now, and the water is cool and refreshing as I approach the first wave. I'm poised and ready to dive in, then happen to glance to my right, and notice a small lagoon scooped out and separated from the rest of the ocean by a very low tide. On impulse, I decide to investigate.

Curiously, I approach the lagoon to stare into the murky water. It doesn't look very deep, and I'm just

about to stick my foot in, when the water surface ripples and separates. A tail appears and begins to splash helplessly from side to side, protesting against its peculiar watery prison.

“Oh, you're trapped, you poor thing.” I bend low, and that's when I see what I've got. “A shark! Oh, no—this is terrible! How can I help you?” If I don't do something quickly, I'm sure it will die.

The only way is to dig him out. I head back to the beach a short distance to grab a shovel-size piece of driftwood that had washed ashore. “You'll do!” I say, then hurry back to start digging. Furiously.

Totally forgetting my own safety, I scoop large sections of the wall around the lagoon away before I notice the head of the shark is now only inches from my arms. Possibly four feet long, gray in color, a stocky shape with a broad, flat snout, and blank eyes which I imagine to be staring pleadingly into mine. Sharks have such dark, lifeless-looking eyes it's hard to tell what they're thinking. Anyway, I start talking to it, hoping that may spark some sort of connection between us.

“You're a Bull Shark, right? Don't worry, I'll get you out of here. I promise!” Now its tail is closer, though I'm barely aware of it with all my digging. Only one foot or so remaining between the lagoon and deeper water. And that's when something weird happens. I notice that every time I dig, the shark's tail goes crazy.

“My gosh, they're right! Bull sharks are intelligent! Are you trying to help me, shark? If you are, keep doing that and we'll win!”

As though he understands, the shark responds with a giant thrash of his tail, and we break through and water begins to trickle in. “Come on ocean—take my friend home!” I yell, as if the ocean were a living, breathing thing that can respond to me, all the while digging away to make the channel deeper. If only the tide would turn soon, those small waves would increase in size and power. Enough to take my shark back into to deep waters. In the meantime, he continues with that wild whipping up of the surf which inches him forward.

“That's it! We're out!” I shout triumphantly, as I feel the strong tide attempting to suck me out to sea. But my shark isn't quite free yet. His tail thrashes desperately a few more times—like he senses he's close to freedom. But it's still too shallow for him to glide through.

“Keep trying, my friend—a little harder!” I encourage him.

Instead, his movements are slow. He seems lethargic now—weaker. I have to do more. Quickly. No time to think. We're at the last part of the lagoon wall, with deep water just on the other side.

“You're not going to be able to do this on your own, are you, mate? You'll have to let me help.”

No movement at all, now.

I take a deep breath. Then slowly, gently...I slide my arms under his belly. “That's it, feller... we can do this together.” As I glance down at the smooth, living creature, my mind begins to rattle off all the facts I've learned about Bull Sharks. Highly social—sometimes hunt in groups. They have intense curiosity and can possess powerful problem solving skills. More importantly, at certain times, male Bulls are believed to allow females to dominate. Hmm...Am I crazy, or does this shark actually recognize I'm female? Can he really be handing dominance over to me because he's desperate?

Two dull, blank eyes, pleading for his life—I can feel it—as I gently walk him towards deeper water, and survival. My mind is still computing what I know about Bull Sharks. Named the “pit bull of the sea” because of its aggressive behavior, an adult Bull shark can grow up to eleven feet long, and live for about thirteen years. They are one of only three types of sharks who can survive in both freshwater and salt, and have been known to attack humans, unprovoked. However--and this statistic is what I repeat to myself, now--the number of females attacked by Bull sharks, is practically nonexistent. Weirdly amazing.

“Don't worry, boy. I'll have you back in your ocean before you know it. Just stay quiet, and I'll do the work.” My arms are placed well away from that terrifying

mouth and there is only the slightest flutter of his powerful tail. I don't want to lose him! As quickly as possible, I work with the tide.

Am I really doing this? Carrying a four foot shark into deep water? The brave Joanie Thomas better show up soon, because this beautiful animal will die without her help. "We need her, don't we, shark?"

I'm half-walking, half bobbing along with the tide, deeper and deeper, supporting his head below water the whole time. No wildly thrashing tail to avoid, only pathetic little flaps. My shark doesn't seem aware that we're really deep now, and this worries me. By now, my emotions are raw, and tears threaten. I can't bear to think of losing him after all this.

He lays still in my arms, just beneath the surface of the water, as a crazy thought hits. "I think you know I'm a girl, Mr. Bull shark. That's why you're letting me rescue you." Suddenly I notice he has a torn fin and my heart aches for him.

Not even a flutter from his tail, and his head starts to loll back and forth with the gentle movement of the sea. I'm at shoulder level, mainly walking or hopping along the ocean floor, trying to decide how much deeper I can go with him in my arms. What we're doing has filled me with confidence that this shark really is allowing me to help him. He has purposely handed temporary dominance to a female. In this case, me. Either that, or

it's all been too much and he's almost dead.

Then—without warning—there's a sudden, jerky splash, and my arms are empty. My shark has revived! And taken off with one giant thrash of his tail. Within seconds, I can't even see him anymore. But I'm so happy I just stand there, watching the emptiness for a few minutes. “Don't forget me, shark. Please don't forget me.” I say aloud, even though he's gone.

Then I'm crying—from excitement, or release from the tension—I don't know why. Maybe because I wanted so badly to believe he really did know what he was doing. Didn't he? I turn back toward shore, plunge into a wave, take a few strokes...then spin back around to see if I can catch a glimpse of that distinctive fin.

Nothing.

That's when it hits me. I was not one scrap scared of being in the water with that shark. In fact, I don't think I'll ever feel totally afraid of being in the water with sharks, again. I'm convinced that it was just like they told us at school: If you leave them alone and keep your distance, they'll leave you alone, too. Then a crazy thought hits me. What else is there to be afraid of if I'm not afraid of sharks? For all I know, there could be dozens of them under the surface of the water right now, yet they're all leaving me alone. It could be true. And that's totally cool.

I meet the next wave head on, slicing neatly through

it as it slams into me. That's when I realize just exactly what I've been doing for the last half-hour besides saving a stranded bull shark. What I've been doing is re-establishing myself. I'm not just that new girl, Joanie Thomas, over at Shark Heads, anymore. I have a purpose. The same one I've had for a long time now, except that I've pushed it way back in my mind during all the changes in my life. But today things seem to have turned around. It was almost as if I had help. Almost as if...

It wasn't until I said, "Thank you, Lord," as I rose up out of the sea, that I realized how long it had been since I actually talked to Him. He had helped me out back in Perisher Valley, too. When I was so gutted about going to another new school. And then I met Riley—the best friend of my life—on the very first day. He told me about the youth group and things got so much better after that. Now, I have the most wonderful feeling that I'm not alone. The Lord is here in Shark Heads with me, too. He has put me in this exciting place—miraculously set up just for me—and has given me something important to do. Maybe even vital, considering we humans are slaughtering sharks so fast many are already on the endangered species list. That is awful. They are an amazing part of God's creation.

We really must learn to share the ocean—even with the dangerous ones. Especially if we take time to learn

more about their behavior instead of simply trying to wipe them off the planet. They aren't just the eating machines everyone thinks they are. Sharks have intelligence. They might even be capable of friendship with us – sort of like bears that will fish peacefully in a river at the same time as humans. I'm not exactly sure about that, yet—it will take more research, and possibly another pair of hands. Along with a sound backing in oceanography. It needs to be solidly fact-based before I can even try to convince anyone else. Especially in a place with a name like Shark Heads.

What a bummer that Riley lives so far away. Then something else flashes into my mind, too.

I might not have an entire country, or God, Himself, to defend with my life but I can at least try to do some good for these magnificent creatures who are being hounded year after year. Whose very lives seems to mean less than nothing to almost everybody.

I shut my eyes tight as the final thought hits me. With the right kind of support—and if I tried really hard—if I put everything I had into it...I could be...

Joan of Shark.

5

Waiting for the bus after school the next day, I have close to an hour to fill in. A nuisance, but I'm resigned to it. Under the shade of an enormous old jacaranda tree, I settle down on the thick grass. Other than a couple of comments on my new hairstyle, everyone was pretty decent, today. Not totally cool, but at least accepting of my presence as I navigated through my day.

Good on ya', kid, I tell myself, you didn't let any of them get to you, this time. Sighing deeply, I look around at how green everything is. It cheers me up. My eyes scan our school's super-green sports oval. Beyond that there's a park with a couple of children's swings but it's deserted at the moment. I lean back on my elbows and am soon into thinking about marine life, again. "This whole town needs to wake up to the fact that if the oceans die, we all die." I speak aloud, as I often do when I'm alone. Then I suddenly realize I'm not. The most unusual girl I've ever seen in my life is standing a few feet away.

I smile up at her, and she plonks herself down beside me with a friendly, lopsided grin.

“You’re Joanie Thomas, aren’t you? Gideon pointed you out to me. I’m Grace Langford.”

“Hello. I’ve been hoping to meet you, Grace. And in case you heard me talking to myself a few minutes ago, I assure you I’m really quite sane—honest.”

She laughs.

Shorter than me—petite even, and frail in build. Grace’s hair is long, and so blonde it’s nearly white, with a fringe that hangs down past her eyebrows. That’s the first thing I notice about Grace. The next thing is her delicate, facial features. And something almost unheard of for an Aussie girl—not one freckle or mole in sight. Lucky duck. Some of us are covered in the little blighters.

What a contrast she and I would make if we were to stand side by side. My hair midnight black and seriously hacked—Grace’s hair long, white and flowing—as smooth as a silvery moon.

“Bet you’re thinking someone butchered my last haircut,” Might as well poke fun at myself. “I’ll tell you about it one day.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” She quips back.

Easy to see this girl has a sense of humor and can probably give back as good as she gets. She moves farther back into the shade and takes out a thirty-plus

sunblock cream from her bag, which she begins to apply as she speaks. “Have to take every precaution when you spend as much time in the sun as I do.”

“I should take a lesson from you. I’m always forgetting to put more on.”

Suddenly, a kangaroo hops across the park, to vanish into the surrounding trees. “Pretty neat, eh?” She nods towards the unique creature with the short arms and enormous feet.

“Yeah, I love wildlife. Sea creatures, especially. I’ve wanted to study them for a long time, so living here is a great opportunity.” Already I feel comfortable with Grace. Like I can tell her anything.

“I take it you like to swim, then.”

“I love to swim.” Big emphasis on the word love.

She brings out two cans of cola from her backpack and offers me one. I smile and accept, feeling immediately drawn to her friendliness. “Gideon says you’re from the outback, too. So, how did you get so interested in swimming?”

“I’ve had asthma since I was five,” I explain. “That’s why I took up swimming almost before I can remember. I keep up on it wherever we go. Practically gone, now. I hardly even think about it anymore.”

Grace listens quietly—and without interruption—as though she really gives a darn about what I have to say. I like that.

“Except I’ve never been in the ocean until I came here.”

She nods, as though she gets the difference. “Cool, Joanie. And we get the wildest waves, here.” Next minute she’s sliding backwards on the grass, again, chasing the receding shade. “My Mom got me started in swimming lessons practically our first day here, and I’ve been hooked on it ever since. Helps with my oceanography major—marine science. In particular, marine ecology.”

“Hey, I’m taking oceanography, too.” I blurt out.

“What did you mean when you said, if the ocean dies we all die?”

“Well, it might not be happening, yet, but it will.” Inside, I’m a bit worried. How awful if Grace thinks I’m a nut.

“Yes, it dead-set will. I’ve been telling my folks that things are already happening as we speak. Underneath—where no-one can see. Things that will be impossible to reverse. If they witnessed what I see when I surf every day, they’d be as scared about our future as we are.”

“It would be great if we lived close enough to get together sometimes. Sort of feels like we think the same about things. Do you live very far from here?” Fingers and toes crossed.

“Actually, I think we only live a couple of blocks from each other. If you take the same bus I do, that is. I’d

rather take the bus, too, but you know parents. They're always finding reasons to drive to town and collect me.”

“I can relate. I'm an only kid, too.”

“Then you know the drill. Today it's because we're having dinner at the Red Barn. Hey, maybe you can come with us, sometime.”

“I'd like that.” We sit for a minute in companionable silence before I ask, “You said it's all happening underneath the water where nobody can see. Are you in scuba diving class?”

“No. I'm not scheduled for that until next semester.”

I can hear the disappointment in her voice.

“You are? So am I. It looks like the only difference in our courses is that I'm doing marine biology, while you've chosen marine ecology.”

“Pretty neat, eh? We both have two different components of oceanography. I'm doing my summer assignment on why marine ecology is so important. Scientists know the world's oceans are critically needed to sustain life on earth, but most others don't. They're shocked when they hear how cures for so many diseases could be found in the ocean. Evidence of that is what I'm hoping to find by snorkeling around the shallows in this area.”

“That's terrific! It ought to make for a really amazing assignment.”

“I think so. And I can't wait until I'm dive certified

so I can go even deeper. Got the coolest underwater camera for my birthday but I'm still searching for the best location for the actual documentation.”

This is so cool. How awesome is God for answering my prayers so perfectly?

“Have to admit I'm curious about something, though, Joanie. If you swim in the ocean so much, how have you managed not to get eaten?” Suddenly she sits up straight. “I mean, everyone else around here is dead scared of sharks.”

She pauses to brush a few blades of grass off her school uniform, then continues. “And why shouldn't they be? Shark Heads has more attacks than any other beach town on Australia's east coast. Despite all of us pulling together to keep the numbers down.”

Okay – she's got me. Should I agree with her, or spill right now? No. Better not to give too much away the first time you meet someone. Test the waters first. “Actually, I like sharks,” I try to keep my voice as matter-of-fact as possible. “That's why I've chosen them for my summer science assignment.”

“Really? But how will you do your research? A glass bottom boat? A shark cage?”

“Good ideas. But so far I haven't used anything. Just snorkeling and observing. And I haven't figured out the best way to document it, yet. Have to admit though, your idea of filming underwater is pretty fantastic.”

“Oh that was more Gideon's idea, really. He's the one who's so into film and photography. Now that we've done a couple of projects together I'm starting to catch the bug, too. So, it's definitely our mutual passion. We spend hours trying to get the perfect shot, sometimes. Hey, it would be spectacular if we could get one of you swimming with sharks in the distance. Gideon would go wild over that. Unless he had to jump in and save you, or something. He mightn't like that much.”

We both laugh at the thought.

“Seriously, though, I'm pretty careful. I wear a bright bathing suit so they know I'm not a seal, and avoid their well-known feeding times. When I do spot one I try not to make any sudden moves. Keep plenty of distance between us and all that.”

Then she goes quiet for a while and I wonder if she disapproves.

“But this is only my first week,” I tell her. “Other than the beach outside our back door, I have no idea about which places are better than others.”

“Well, you have a lot more nerve than I do. I'm a strong swimmer but I always try to stay on my surfboard as much as I can. Shark Heads didn't get its name for nothing, you know.”

“Yes, of course. But don't you agree we at least need to be open to new ideas? It's not so crazy when you think about it. Maybe we can learn to share the ocean with

sharks. Eventually.”

That last phrase catches her off-guard, and her jaw drops open, like I was crazy.

“Maybe I’ll be able to prove that to you someday, too.” My tone is half-joking but at least I’ve broken ground. “Anyway, how about you two come to the beach in back of our lighthouse tomorrow after school? There’s a nice little lagoon you might like to check out that could be just what you’re looking for.”

“Really?”

“Sure, I’d love some company. Not to mention all the good advice. Me being the newbie around here.”

“That would be awesome. Except...I’m pretty sure Gideon will insist on bringing his spear gun along for protection. Are you okay with that?”

6

When I get home Dad's nowhere to be seen, so I reckon he's had to do some business at the hospital labs in Sydney, again. Which means Mom will be under a black cloud, as usual, and may not have even bothered to get up, today. Considering her sun rises and sets with him, what can I say. Because when she does finally gather enough energy to snap out of it, she's her usual wonderful self. The main thing about Mom is that she is beautiful inside and out. We've always been close.

Except it seems to have gotten worse since we arrived in Shark Heads. What's happening with all that? We've always bolstered each other up about the sacrifices we have to make because of his work. Especially since Ted's disappearance. Whatever it is, it's all been too much for her. But what I do know is that I can't add to her worries. I can't let any of my own problems show when she's struggling like this.

I start rustling around in the kitchen for something to

eat and she finally makes an appearance.

“Lets get some light in here.” I open the curtains as she sits down on the kitchen stool. “Why were you sleeping so long? Not sick, are you?”

“No, I'm fine, dear. Nothing for you to worry about and—” Her hand flies to her neck as she looks at me and her lower jaw drops open. “Joanie! What have you done to your hair?”

“Just felt like a change. Want to come outside for a while? I want you to see how pretty the ocean looks in the afternoon sun and how the surf is up, today.”

She stiffens, so I guess I'm wasting my breath.

“We can at least chat outside for a bit. Did you eat any lunch today?” I open the back door, and head for the comfy outdoor chairs. Then motion for her to join me, pleased when she does.

“Lunch? No, I guess I forgot. Your father had the morning off and we got talking.”

Peculiar the way she perches on the edge of one of the chairs and starts pushing loose gravel around with the toe of her slipper. Like she's anxious to get away. “He has to stay in Sydney for a while, dear, but he'll try to make it home most weekends. Oh—and he wants me to remind you it's not safe to go swimming just yet.”

I sit bolt upright in my chair. “Most weekends? Mom, what's going on? I thought living close to Sydney meant he wouldn't need so much travel time.”

Did I just see her shiver? It's hot today. But at least she's out of bed and we're talking.

“Your father can't help it, Joanie. He's so close to a breakthrough he can't think of anything else. But things are always brighter for you when he's home, aren't they?”

“Yes, but I know you're lonely for him, too, Mom. You two love each other so much.”

“Yes, we do. But sometimes love isn't enough.” Her head is turned away from me when she says that. “The point is, he's doing important research work and I don't want to distract him”

“What's really wrong, Mom? Please tell me.” I scoot my chair closer to hers, staring at her sad eyes—stunned at how her whole body language seems to have changed. Dad must have noticed, too. He can't be that blind. Probably leaving things up to me again, the way he always does.

“Nothing, dear. It's just hard the way time moves things around.” I watch her eyelids flutter and the nervous move of one hand towards an invisible curl.

I'm usually so in tune with my mother but this fragile, unhappy person feels like a stranger. She is miles away from being the energetic and funny mom I used to have. That's when I realize Shark Heads hasn't been very good for either of us, really. Not with her spending most of her time in bed and me doing something on the sly that

neither of them approve of.

Still, I paste a bright smile on my face. “Did I tell you Riley’s driving down this weekend? And a couple of weeks, after that, he and his family want to check out a few rentals, plus do some sightseeing. We’re invited, too. Should be fun.”

She stops fiddling with her hair and looks at me. You’d think I just announced we needed to emigrate to Atlantis, or something. “Good heavens, no! Your father might come home and I’d be gone. You can go if you want to, though. I trust Riley’s dad and his new wife to take good care of you. What was her name, again? A.J, or something?”

“Ashlee. EG is their neighbor. Somebody Mr. Williams grew up with. They’re just good friends.”

“Ashlee, then. You go with them and don’t worry about me. I’ve got everything I need here.”

Yeah, everything except a life. “Dad would have let us know if he was coming home that soon after being gone for several weeks. He always lets us know when he’ll be back. I don’t want to leave you alone, locked in this house with no neighbors nearby. If you don’t come I can’t go, either, and I really want to. You wouldn’t have to worry about a thing. Honest.”

Her head tips to one side like she’s considering it, and my heart skips a beat.

“This area has some awesome places we haven’t

even seen yet.”

“I suppose.” She takes a detour mentally, which makes me want to know what happens to trigger her mind into transforming from my old mom one minute, into a frightened little sparrow the next. I am getting really worried, now.

Later, when we head back inside and just when I’ve got my head in the freezer searching for something to cook for dinner, the phone rings. Mom’s closer, so she picks it up.

“Oh, hello, Preston, it’s lovely to hear from you. And congratulations on your marriage to Ashlee. Patrick and I are both thrilled for you.”

I’m only half-listening as I sort through some packets, racking my brains as to how I can rustle up something out of nothing. I’m inspecting a rusty can in the pantry when I hear her say, “Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly come, but thanks for inviting me. Joanie can join you, though. I expect she probably wants to talk to you about it right now.”

The kitchen phone gets shoved at me and I reluctantly accept it, feeling like I want to bawl with disappointment. Riley and I had planned to do more investigating on Ted’s disappearance since we discovered he spent a lot of time here in Shark Heads getting things set up for this stage of research.

We might even find a substantial piece of the puzzle

if we look hard enough.

"Sorry Mr. Williams, I can't go, either." I tell him, then drop the truth bomb. "I want to but Mom's not settled yet, and..."

I shove the phone back to her and tear out of the room, bawling like a little kid.

But I couldn't help it.

Sometimes I swear, even my own mother seems to be against me.

When I wake next morning the house is in darkness and she's sleeping like the dead. After peeking into her room long enough to make sure she was still breathing, I hurry upstairs to the attic and switch the lighthouse lamp off. I've been doing that every day. After that, I head back down to attend to my regular household chores. Because who's gonna do them if I don't?

She seems to be slipping farther away each day. Which starts up the familiar, choking sense of panic, so bad this time I think I may explode. My heart is pounding away inside my chest like I either have to get out of here, or scream. What's happening to me? How can I stop it?

For a moment I wonder if telling Mom I don't feel well might snap her out of whatever has her in its grip. But she'd probably take me straight to a doctor to find out what it was—maybe even call Dad back from Sydney if it looked like anything serious. No way I want that to happen. Not when he's closer to a breakthrough

than he's been in his whole career. The greatest discovery of his life.

No, the best thing I can do—for everybody—is to get a grip and hold down the fort, like Dad expects me to. But I can at least head out for a quick swim. Might even calm my nerves. Considering the churning sensation in the pit of my stomach starts to ease as I head down the steps to the beach, I'm pretty sure that—for the second time in my life—swimming just might be the cure. Anyway, I begin to breathe normally again. Or maybe it's the sunrise. They're almost as good as the sunsets around here.

The first wave I hit with a smooth dive, then start to swim. Am I imagining that the sea life in these waters seem used to me now? Or is it only me who's changed. Even the sharks don't seem to be taking any notice of me. After that experience with my shark, I know they're everywhere. Sydney waters are full of sharks. That's a well-known fact.

Strange that Grace still doesn't avoid swimming in the ocean. Which tells me she's stronger than she looks. It takes a lot for a person to put aside their fears in order to accomplish something they want to do even more. I've heard locals talking about how they had adopted a new method of keeping cool around here. A speed boat drags a net full of people along behind it and they have fun and stay protected at the same time. That wouldn't do for

what Grace and I have in mind, though. It would chase away all the sea life we want to observe closer.

But that doesn't mean I haven't adapted a few important rules of my own out here. Such as being careful not to agitate the water too much, so everyone can continue to mind their own business. Not to mention I can hardly study the habits of sharks very thoroughly if I'm being dragged along in a swim net, with dozens of other swimmers.

Then I quit thinking about all that, because, by this time, I'm a long way out, surrounded by several varieties of fish. Some quite large. Two porpoises, and a stray shark or two which hold my attention. How gracefully they swim. I count four to my right, apparently swimming together, as I head for even deeper water. After a while, I spot three sharks ahead but ignore them...and they ignore me.

Wow—one's a hammerhead! I'm chuffed to get my first look at that weird-looking animal. But what I'm really hoping to see again is the shark I rescued. I'm positive he was a Bull. And how vividly I recall the sight of that torn fin—which ought to help me recognize him if our paths cross, again. I know the Great Whites are supposed to be heading further north soon but our local Sydney sharks—like the Port Jackson and the Bulls—they hang around longer. So I'm told.

Suits me.

No luck seeing him this morning though.

As I climb back up the rock steps to the lighthouse, I'm feeling more like the old enthusiastic Joanie. In fact, I'm keen to seriously tackle my studies no matter what social dramas are going on, either at home, or at school. Let's hope I can hang onto that feeling all day.

And I do.

So, maybe I have finally made it past the new-kid-at-school stage and this monster school has mercifully sunk back to normal size again. Even the marathon bus ride home doesn't seem so bad, as it actually gives me a little time to retreat into my own world.

Not long after that, Gideon, Grace, and I meet down on the beach as planned.

"Where did you cop this little beauty from, Joanie?" Gideon slings his long legs over the side of our family rowboat from the dock.

"Dad bought it for us. Mom and I haven't even used it, yet, but hopefully that will change once Riley moves to Shark Heads." I'm staring at his large equipment bag. No spear gun would fit inside that. Maybe Grace talked him out of it. Oh, thank goodness.

"Are you thinking we can work better from here, Gideon?" Grace asks after we've climbed on board. "This boat is very small—just room for the three of us." She frowns, peering around like she's sizing it up, while Gideon gets busy attaching a special four foot rod, to a

camera. I've seen those rods in photography shops. They can get you deeper than you care to go yourself.

"Okay, that's done. Now here's the action plan, girls." He looks at me. "Joanie, you swim out to where you go every day." Then he turns to Grace. "I can row fast enough to keep up with her. And don't worry about the angles, hon. I think they'll be awesome from the boat. Just make sure you get plenty of shots of whatever sea life she happens to run into. We'll add the commentary later. We'll keep close but not too close. We don't want to frighten anything off."

Grace touches my arm. "You good with that, Joanie?"

Am I good with it? We're getting ready to capture some of my friends on camera—show the world how beautiful they are. "Yes, I'm good with it. It's just the sort of stuff I need to change people's minds. Like they say, a picture's worth a thousand words."

I am a little disappointed, though, because it would have been nice to have Grace swim with me. But I don't say anything. It doesn't really matter, as long as they get some good shots.

"Here's one for you, Joanie," Gideon pulls a thing about the size of a miner's headlamp out of the bag and fastens it onto the top of my goggles. "There. It's good to go, you don't even have to think about it."

"Hey, thanks!" I feel the top and it's in just the right

place for when I pull my mask down.

“It'll be more dramatic if we can sprinkle some close-ups into the video. Even if it's just angel fish and reef coral.”

“Wow, I can't wait to see how it all turns out. Sure you don't want to swim with me, Grace?”

Gideon flashes me an understanding smile but says nothing as he adjusts her goggles, too.

“Sorry, Joanie. Gideon needs me to keep track of you from the boat while he rows, although I'll be using the underwater extension if I catch sight of anything interesting coming your way.”

“No worries, guys.” I'm trying to sound more confident than I really am. “I'll just enjoy the swim. Play around out there awhile, and see what happens.”

Without waiting for an answer, I perch on the side of the boat just long enough to pull my goggles down before slipping slowly into the ocean to swim away. How warm the water is today. But I've only done a few strokes when I hear Gideon call out. I turn around to swim back to the boat.

Grace is leaning over the side, waiting for me. “Hang onto my hands, Joanie. Gideon thinks we ought to pray, first.”

Now why didn't I think of that?

Then we both close our eyes as Gideon prays.

“Father God. We know you're with us always, but

today we ask you to protect us, and help us take some amazing footage of your lovely sea life. We need it to show the world a better way to treat them.” He taps Grace on the shoulder. “You can let Joanie go now, Grace.”

And suddenly I'm out there, gliding through my amazing undersea world. After a few minutes I'm in deeper water and see a fin in the distance. Tiny slivers of alarm tickle my nerves. I've taken all the precautions. The bright colored swimsuit I'm wearing, definitely doesn't look like a seal. Then again, who knows if sharks aren't as color-blind as Riley and can't tell the difference between colors in the same ways we humans can. No schools of bait in the area, though. I checked on that when I first slipped into the water.

When I surface for a breath of air, I notice a few black clouds gathering and wonder if a storm is coming up. We will have to go back to shore if it gets too choppy out here in the bay for our little boat. I feel for my camera, again, to make sure it's still there, then head back under to see what I can find. At the same time I take a quick glance below and behind me. Great Whites stalk and ambush their prey from the bottom. Scary. That breed I am definitely not sure about.

But nothing like that is in sight and pretty soon I start feeling comfortable enough to flip over onto my back and float for a few seconds of rest. Not for long, though.

There could be dozens of sharks swimming in the vicinity, so I have to keep checking below. But the water is calm, and so many of my other ocean friends are nearby.

I spot a tortoise I know I've seen many times, and the schools of tiny, bright, yellow and blue fish that dart in one direction and then another, as if someone is sending out orders to go right or go left all at the same time. I pop up to check on the boat after that and locate it a little too far away. Better head back in that direction or they will miss any good shots they might get of me swimming out here.

Diving deep, I stop short of touching bottom, content to bounce happily off with my tiptoes after turning. Then I catch sight of a hammerhead, Not sure if it's the same one I saw this morning but he seems to be cruising along the bottom, minding his own business. Good on you, fella.

The next time I surface the boat is closer. Grace sees me looking and gives a 'thumbs-up.' So I'm feeling secure enough to resume my lazy tooling along, madly excited to see another enormous old turtle plus a family of sea horses. Oh, this is too perfect! And it gets even better when some larger fish come cruising past at slow-motion pace.

This time when I look up, the boat's shadow is right over me. Good. That makes me feel safer until I become

aware of an eerie stillness near to the bottom that I've never felt before. Which sort of freaks me out. So, I head for the surface, again. Maybe that's enough pictures for our first video expedition.

Near the top is a school of smaller fish swimming in perfect formation, as multi-colored as the swimsuit I'm wearing. They part in the middle as I swim through. But just as I look back to see if they came together, again, they suddenly take fright, and dart away entirely until I can't even see them anymore. Not a good sign. The murky depths I'm drifting over, now, have turned darker and creepier, too. I stop swimming to tread water for a few seconds. Where did the boat go?

I make a slow spin around, and catch sight of it farther off, again. Grace is holding the oars, now, and when she sees me looking, high five's me. Gideon is hanging over the side using the underwater attachment. All is well. Just then two porpoises swing in close as they swim past, making quite a racket blowing through their blowholes before taking another breath. I wish they would stay instead of just passing through, though. They're dominant over sharks so no need to worry when they're in the vicinity. Not to mention how famous they already are for their friendliness to humans.

I dive below again. Just in time to spot a big old groper and I swim alongside him, slow and steady, totally wrapped at how he allows me into his personal

space. Something I had only dreamed about before. Like maybe all the sea life in this cove really are starting to accept me. Magic!

Way off in the distance I count more sharks circling. Just hanging back, like they've decided to keep their distance, too. For the moment, anyway. Our sports teacher told us that sharks will often circle—sometimes even bump you—if they intend to attack. That's when you should swim away and exit the water while keeping your face toward them.

Time to go.

For a minute I'm unsure which way I'm headed. So, I stop moving for a second, trying to sense what direction the tide is going as I drift up. The sharks are still hanging around but they actually seem to be giving me a wide berth. Then, without warning, a long, dark shape suddenly appears out of the depths, traveling fast.

I'm treading water—barely—just enough to keep afloat when it passes so close I can feel the surge of its wake. But it doesn't bump into me. Thank heaven! I would not like to experience what is called a Bump and Bite. Most sharks change their mind when they find you're not what they were expecting, but a person can quickly bleed to death from even a small shark bite. And sometimes they don't change their mind.

Uh-oh. He's coming back. So much for swimming away slow. I race for the surface, come up floundering

and gasping for air. Where is the boat? I can't turn to look all around me—I don't dare turn my back—I just slowly start moving in the opposite direction, whether it's out to sea, or not. A terrible fear grips me, and for one split second, I wonder what in the world I'm doing out here. I could be killed and everything would be over!

My parent's lives would be over.

And for what reason? Maybe wild things really don't have any feelings for anything else. What was I thinking? What was I—then I spotted it—the torn fin. Coming from the opposite direction, it moved in so close to me I could have reached out and touched it. But it didn't bump. Instead it brushed past me—a nudge—as if to say, “Hello! Remember me?” It was the Bull shark I rescued! I knew it! And he was my friend.

As he passed by, another school of small fish ahead of me darted out of the way, as though something had frightened them. Then I remember to duck my head down to take a quick look around—and spot another shark in the distance. He's much larger than my Bull—huge—and white.

I know what that means, and I freeze in panic as he turns to come straight at me. But then my shark friend returns and—incredibly—positions himself between the Great White and myself. Deliberately. He has made himself a shield of protection between me and the dangerous predator. Move, girl! Your Bull shark is

saving your life—head for the boat!

But my arms feel heavy. My legs reduced to no more than feeble kicks. Even the other sharks which had been circling have vanished. Now, this new one is heading toward me at lightning speed. My friend the Bull swings away from me and swerves into the oncoming Great White, knocking him off course. And—within seconds—the two giants of the ocean begin to fight.

Too terrified to look back over my shoulder, I swim away as fast as I can, and catch sight of the boat off to my right. Thank God! I reach the surface in time to see Gideon furiously working the oars and that little boat is going faster than I ever believed it could, powering toward me. Grace is standing at the bow, hanging on with one arm and waving furiously at me with the other. She's hollering something, too, but I can't quite make out what it is.

“I need you, God—please—rescue me!” I'm praying with every stroke I take. Almost there and my friends are both leaning over, now, ready to pull me up as soon as I get within reach. I hold up one tired arm. No more than inches away from them but it suddenly feels as if I can't breathe—like another panic attack coming on—and without thinking I rip my goggles off and fling them away.

“Joanie!” Gideon yells.

A second later he grabs my hands, pulls hard, and

hauls me out with a mighty yank. I'm in! But at the same moment I collapse onto the bottom of the boat I hear the sound of a splash behind us.

Grace has jumped into the water.

"Grace! Get out of there!" Gideon starts to climb over the side. "Forget the camera!"

But by that time she's already grabbed it and is swimming back at a speed any Olympic champion would be proud of. Gideon braces one foot on the gunnels and leans down to snatch her slender body out of the water as soon as she reaches up to him.

A few seconds later there's a mighty bump, and the boat rocks violently back and forth.

"Hang on, girls!" he booms as he and Grace tumble down onto the bottom of the boat beside me, "That thing is trying to capsize us!"

7

We all grab for the sides or wrap arms around one of the seats. The swaying has only just eased, when a second bump shoves us sideways and sets the boat to rocking wildly, again. I look over at Grace, and notice the strap of my goggles hanging from her arm, with the little black camera attached.

“I got it!” she assured when she caught me looking.

“Grace! It blows my mind to think what you did to get it!”

“They were too busy to care and when I saw what that other shark did for you back there, I knew there would be something spectacular on there and—”

Suddenly, we heard a mighty whack and a splash as Gideon brought down one of the oars hard onto the head of the Great White, and we turned in time to see it hang motionless for a moment, then sink back down into the sea. “Get out of here, you—big bully!” he roared.

After that, there were a few moments of silence except for the rocking of the boat as it subsided.

Then it was gone.

“We got it on video—the whole thing!” Grace’s voice sounded more excited than afraid. “I couldn’t believe it but I do, now!”

Gideon let go of the oar, as if it got too heavy all of a sudden. “Man—the Lord is either going to have to give me the strength of Samson or the wisdom of Solomon if I have to watch out for both of you at the same time. That wore me out!”

“Pretty sure He heard that prayer,” I stifled a giggle because he really did look beat. “You scared him off, all right!”

He sank down beside us and pulled us both into a hug. “Thank you, Lord! For not letting that Great White have us for dinner! Oh, and please give Joanie some of that wisdom, too, so she’ll understand how dangerous it is to swim so far out, next time.”

“Amen!” Grace agreed.

Any other time I might have argued. But it was totally impossible to argue—how could I—when two of the most fantastic people I ever met were hanging onto me like we’d been friends forever and they cared more than anything about what happened to me? I think I loved them like family from that moment on.

We all decided that was way enough excitement for one day and headed back to the dock. Gideon was excited to look at what we had on the cameras and

promised to let me see it as soon as he and Grace did some editing and voice-overs to turn it into something that would be able to present my case for the rights of wild things. I was sort of thinking the sharks had done a pretty good job of showing their points of view from every angle, but I didn't mention it. Not after what we just went through.

Could be I would feel more like Joan of Shark, again, after a hot shower. But right now, I was shaking like the old Joanie Thomas. After we packed things back into Gideon's Ute, I waved goodbye to my wonderful new friends—the best kind of friends I could have. Because like Riley, they proved by their actions where they stood with you. Not just by words.

Walking up the front stairs to the house after they left, wrapped in a super-size beach towel, I was just in time to hear my phone ringing. It was Riley, and I'm suddenly perked up and super happy to hear his voice. “Gotta’ warn you Rye, I just walked in—soaking wet—and dying of thirst. Give me a minute.”

Pressing the speakerphone button, I set my phone on the table so I could get a drink. Riley is waiting, I'm still excited over our filming adventure, and I'm feeling on top of the world.

“Ok, put your mom on then, and I'll try to persuade her to come with us on our local tour.”

“Uh... Mom's not coping so great these days. And

Dad's in Sydney, again.”

“Gotcha. Must be hard on her with your dad's work taking him away all the time and him having to train a new assistant.”

“Hey, back up! I knew he was taking applications, but did he finally pick one out? Where did you hear that?”

“From EG. She told me after she went to see him about Ted. Seems she came across the same place in Mr. Never's manuscript as we did, so she knows they knew each other.”

“What else did she say about Dad training someone?” Now this is really weird because I knew Dad had been dragging his heels about the decision. He just wasn't ready to believe Ted wouldn't come waltzing back into our lives with a logical explanation any day.

“She only said his new assistant seemed about half his age and twice as pretty. No extra info about Ted, though. Just that he made more than a few visits to her father.”

I collapse into the nearest chair, shivering all over, again.

“Anyway, I've plowed my way through practically the whole manuscript now. Honest, Joanie, in my opinion, poor EG is just about ready to have a nervous breakdown if we don't help her.”

“Of course we'll help her. But you should have told

me about the new assistant right away, Rye. We have to check out every person Ted came into contact with, prior to his disappearance. We have to find out if it's someone completely new, or a company person that Ted already knew. This is huge."

"Your Mom would know something about it, wouldn't she? I thought your parents talked about anything and everything."

"Not lately. No. You and I are going to have to make our own inquiries. Starting with a visit to the office and lab right here in town that Ted and Dad shared. Since Dad was doing the Rainforest research, Ted was doing most of the stuff here."

"Can we do that?"

"Yes. Dad always leaves a key with me when he's away. In case he wants me to check on something for him." I knew I was coming across kind of agro, but after the drama I'd just been through, I couldn't help it. Now that I was starting to relax, I was feeling sort of tired and emotional about everything. Like my dad spending way more time with a pretty young assistant than Mom.

"That's cool, then. Let's go there on Saturday, when I visit. How long will he be away?"

"Another month, maybe."

"We can work a little on our vacation assignments, too, if we get enough time. I miss working on homework together."

“Me, too, Rye.”

Hey, what did you pick for yours? Mine's Geology. Limestone as it affects the earth's surface.”

“I'm combining some history with science because both those subjects are such a natural fit for mine. I love the depth Mrs. Slade—she's my history teacher—puts into our class. She really brings the past to life in a way you can understand. I'm still working it out in my head, but at least I've got some back-up now. Grace Langford and Gideon.”

“Well, you definitely have my attention, ma'am.”

I laugh, but decide not to tell him about the shark adventure over the phone. Better to let him fall in love with the place first. “We're helping each other work on our assignments. Sort of a...study group. Guess what women leaders in the 15th Century have in common with science? ”

“Women leaders in the 15th Century? Did they have any women leaders back then?”

“Well, if they didn't, then I'm doing a lot of writing for nothing in that class.” I reach for a long side-curl to twist around my fingers, then remember I don't have curls anymore.

“I bet you mean Joan of Arc. I remember you were sort of crazy about her last year, too.”

“She had a lot of qualities, I admired. So, when it came time to choose a project, I picked her.”

“Seems to me she got so wrapped up in her cause she got herself killed for it. Burned at the stake. Man, if that isn't the awfulest way to die I don't know what is. Except maybe getting eaten by a shark. That rates extra high on my creep-meter, too.”

Having felt a glimmer of that fear for the first time myself, I let that remark pass when I would have normally launched into my favorite lecture about how friendly everyone in the ocean would be if only we would leave them alone. “She was incredibly brave, though. You have to admit that.”

“Sure I do. She gave it all up for what she believed in. Not everyone can do that.”

“And that's what I like best about her. Anyway, the teacher says she wants us to imagine what it would be like to step into our character's shoes. So I'm...um...making a few physical changes in myself to try to feel what it was like to be her.”

“What kind of changes? ”

“You'll see.” My big attempt to sound mysterious. Then I take a quick peek in the hallway mirror and decide my haircut actually turned out pretty good, considering I've been underwater for hours.

“Don't do anything crazy, Jo.”

“Hardly. For your information, most of my time is spent trying to make friends with people who don't want any more new friends. If I thought going crazy would

work, I'd probably give that a go, too."

"Still no luck?"

"I may as well be invisible, so many people don't want to talk to me. Except Gideon and Grace. They're both fantastic." They saved my life today, but I didn't want to say anything about that right now, either. If Riley took my parent's side on swimming in my ocean, I would have an even harder time holding out. Mostly because I can't seem to keep any secrets from him. Not that I could hold out very long after that prayer of Gideon's, today. I was feeling a twinge of guilt just thinking about going swimming without more protection.

"Oh yeah, Gideon. The wrestler, from the outback. That dude is gonna' make me look skinny."

"You are skinny."

"Aw, bummer, I was hoping you hadn't noticed," he jokes.

But I know he really does feel self-conscious about being so tall and lean. Still, I like how we can discuss almost every subject, including how we look.

"Don't tell me you're too shy to fit in with the local cool kids, Jo. I'll never forget the way you came stomping into class at Perisher Valley High that first day wearing cowboy boots. Hit 'em with the real Joanie Thomas—dumb it down for them, if you have to. Quit being the next Einstein and people will be more interested."

“Confident women don't need to dumb down, Rye. Besides that, it's been so long since Einstein, we could really use another one about now. The doors are wide open for that job at the moment. And truthfully, I've got so many exciting things to keep me busy lately, that I'm just not that interested in breaking into already closed groups anymore. Life's too short, don't you agree?”

“Yeah. I've got some major news too, but it will have to wait till Saturday because I gotta split. Sorry, Jo.”

Click.

That's Riley. Oh, well. Must be something major, though, if he couldn't tell me over the phone. Like maybe it's something difficult to accept and he'd rather tell me face-to-face. So, either way you look at it...both Rye and I have something we're holding out on each other.

Maybe all that stuff about how hard it is to keep up a long distance relationship, isn't just talk.

8

I sit up in bed early next morning and groan. Only Thursday—two days left until Riley gets here. Before I leave for school, I head for Dad's desk in the study, where he keeps the spare key to his office. Minutes later, with the office key in my pocket, I'm shutting the desk draw to leave when I notice something strange. A different set of keys on a plastic key ring half-hidden under a large envelope. Curious, but not particularly interesting. That is, until I see the name printed on it. A little smudged, but still easy to read.

“You haven't been given permission to take these keys, Joanie.” I challenge myself under my breath.

No, but no-one has told me I can't. And it's not as if I'm suspecting Dad or Ted of doing anything wrong. I'm just surprised to discover them here.

My instinct is to talk this over with Riley. Ask his opinion on whether we should use them, or not. But, to be honest, I already know the answer. I will definitely use them. The first key-ring is marked “T. Griffiths,

office” which seems perfectly normal.

But the big surprise is the other one, marked. “T. Griffiths, safety box.”

What would he have needed one of those for?

By this time I've gotten used to the long bus rides to and from school. Mainly because while I'm staring out the window, I can retreat into my own world. How is it I can feel so close to Joan of Arc when there is such a huge time gap between our two worlds? I find myself a seat, and relax as I listen to the rhythmic clunking of wheels over the bumpy road to school. Gives me a chance to think about my heroine. By the time she neared the end of her life, Joan must have been half-mad from the tortures her judges had already inflicted on her. Yet, the legend is, she still had a few kind words for the woman sent to help her dress for her execution.

“One life is all we have, and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are, and to live a life without belief, that is more terrible than dying.” I don't think I'll ever forget that memorable quote. And we're told it reduced the poor lady to tears.

To the guard who helped secure her to the stake, she assured him. “I am not afraid. I was born to do this.” I've learned all the quotes from Joan, and think of them often. Yet these two are the ones that grip me the most. They make me wonder if there might be something I was born to do, too. If maybe everybody has something like that

but they have to give up another part of themselves to do it. A choice not everybody accepts, I reckon.

Kinda hard to think of doing something for others when you feel as though you're hovering over a pit of quicksand in your own life. Then again, doing something out of the ordinary ought to be pretty energizing. Especially if it's true-blue adventure, like swimming with sharks. I suppose my personal passion for sea life is like chicken-feed compared to what Joan did. Saving an entire country. Facing death every day must have made her strong as nails, or she wouldn't have been able to hang on until the end. As for being burned alive, history says that was her worst nightmare.

But she kept true to her cause because she had a passion for freedom that was stronger than her own personal fears. She also believed—without a doubt—that her army would win because she believed God had instructed her to do what she did. He would make it happen. How she must have trusted Him to accomplish something that had never been done before. Even if she needed to do it by drawing attention to herself—actually making a spectacle of herself, in some ways. A seventeen-year-old girl being in charge of the military forces of an entire country was unheard of.

Never before, and not since.

So how could my swimming with sharks even begin to compare with courage like that? I've been trying to

prove sharks are capable of learning to tolerate us—maybe even make friends with us—which is not one scrap like those life and death battles Joan endured. Am I having a brain snap? But sharks—like all the wildlife on our planet—need someone to stand up for them, too. If they disappear, the rest of us won't be far behind. Someone has to speak up for them.

Few people know—much less care—that decimating the shark population is having serious repercussions in parts of the ocean we humans never see. And it will lead to horrible consequences if we don't put a stop to it. Not just for Australia, but for the whole world. If the oceans die, we all die!

I'm totally lost on my own personal tangent now, which gives me such an incredible idea that I barely notice we've pulled in at the school already. But I don't get any of those sinking feelings in my stomach, just looking at the building, anymore. After a day like yesterday, they are replaced by a feeling that I'll never have a totally bad day at this school, again..

“Thank you, for connecting me up with Grace and Gideon, Lord!” I whisper. Then head straight for my locker because living at the lighthouse makes me late most days.

I try to concentrate on my other subjects, honest I do. But my attentions keep drifting back to my afternoon swim. I'm massively excited. At first, my science project

was going to prove—somehow—that sharks were capable of adapting to share their territory with us. Especially if we take enough time to learn what their own particular “rules of the road” are, then respect them. It’s a known fact that most shark attacks are made by mistake. They don’t even finish off their kill when they discover the person wasn’t a seal or something. It’s just that—with those powerful jaws and sharp teeth—it’s usually too late by that time and fatalities occur due to massive loss of blood.

Like they say at school, not splashing, and minding your own business is the best policy. Which seems to have been working for me, anyway. Not many people take time to learn that though, because sharks aren’t a part of their world. To them, sharks are little more than shadowy creatures, inhabiting an area few of us get to see.

Except for yesterday.

Is it just some breeds that are so unpredictable or are they all that way? Those are the things I will have to find out before I can convince anyone how important it all is. One thing is for certain.

The world definitely needs to understand sharks better. Because—unpredictable or otherwise—we need them just as much as we need bees to pollinate everything that grows into food. But they are so in the danger zone, right now—due almost entirely to humans.

How can people like Grace and I win against such huge misconceptions no-one else seems to even care about? How can a kid like me prove that?

Maybe by taking a tip from Joan and making myself a spectacle, sometimes.

What kind I don't know. I only know it needs to be done. And it's pretty exciting that my history assignment is spilling over into my science assignment. I really believe what I learn from Joan can help me achieve a better impact with my shark project. Not to mention all my other classes, too. She had to face a lot more rejection than I did. I might be considered strange around here but no one is out trying to kill me over it.

Something that helps the day pass quicker, and before I know it, I'm heading down our beach steps, again, admiring the way they curve around ever-so-slightly in their descent to the water. Someone probably went to a lot of trouble to make them that way, so the climb back up wouldn't be too steep. It's mid-summer and the water looks perfect. Before I know it, I'm diving through the first big wave, conscious of not going so far out, this time, in case I have to get back to shore in a hurry.

That's when I notice how deep it is only a few feet from shore, which is most likely why it's a pretty aqua green color, too. A few strokes clear of the wave, and the shelf falls away even deeper. The waves are much bigger

and rougher here, so I duck under a few, then select one which sucks me down until I surface again, on the other side. I fool around lazily for a little while, and before I know it, dinner thoughts are intruding and I realize I haven't taken anything out of the freezer or decided what we can have tonight. Been doing that for Mom so long the impulse is becoming automatic, these days.

Time to catch a ride back to shore. The next few waves I pass on because I'm searching for a suitable contender. The perfect one will take me all the way back. As I find one and ride it in, I totally forget to keep a lookout until a large black shape bobs up to the right of me, then disappears. Porpoise, maybe. But even if it was a shark I'm cool with it. He didn't hang around or make another pass by me.

Soon I'm back on the beach, breathing hard, content to lay back comfortably on the warm sand, and smile up at the afternoon sun. My hair is enmeshed with seaweed and sand, but I don't care. This is the nicest part of my new world, and I simply can't wait to introduce it to Riley. I glance over at the jetty I usually swim to and back from, but I've decided that better be out-of-bounds for a while. Not only is it a long way off, but a lot of things sharks like to feed on hang around out there, too. Best to at least avoid the feeding grounds.

Reluctantly, I finally head for the lighthouse, pausing long enough to look back at the pearly white

sand and the awesome waves as they curl over, then smash themselves onto the beach. At that moment I realize I haven't just accepted our new home, I've fallen in love with it. If only Mom wouldn't keep refusing to visit the beach with me, or even go for a ride in the rowboat. But I won't give up. Tomorrow I'll set up a deck chair—persuade her to sit in it and soak up the sun with me for a while. I'll even sacrifice my swim if she agrees. Then on Saturday, Riley will be here.

Later, I fix a couple of the frozen dinners Mom ordered online—the ones with different names but taste mostly the same—and after that we watch a movie and share some popcorn. Which about does it for our together time. I think she even fell asleep a couple times during the movie. That's getting to be a regular thing, too.

My last thought as I drift off to sleep for the night is that I hope all our friends at youth group back in Perisher Valley are enjoying their Friday night pizza party. There's always something fun going on with them, and I miss not being a part of it anymore. Which reminds me, I better bake those muffins I was planning on having for Riley to snack on tomorrow. One more day and then I will have my best friend—my dearest friend—here with me.

I fall asleep knowing we could actually discover some major piece of the puzzle that will help us to solve

this mystery we've been focused on for so many months. The thing that originally brought us together. The one that's still eating away at us, even though we try to live normal lives like everybody else. Death and disappearance is something a person never forgets, no matter how much time goes by. Especially when they leave questions unanswered that affect so much of everything else.

My life and Riley's were intertwined in mysterious ways a long time before we ever met.

It's why we made a pact to solve this thing. So, I'm hoping what he knows about Dad's medical partner showing up at Mr. Never's party will turn out to be a major clue. Or at least exactly what Ted's connection to the old man was. At first, we thought it might be medical but they got together too many times for that to be all there was to it. No, there is still a big piece of the puzzle missing somewhere.

Snuggling deep into my pillow, I picture dear old Mr. Never, who loved Riley like a grandson. And Riley loved him back just as much. I know, because I saw how devastated he was when Mr. Never died so unexpectedly, with no-one able to explain exactly why.

Then a horrible thought dawned on me.

At first I simply couldn't go there – I mean, everyone loved Mr. Never. No-one would ever want to hurt him. Would they? But if that was true, why hadn't I been able

to escape the feeling that it just didn't add up? Dying so unexpectedly the way he did, with no medical department or doctor able to give an explanation as to what killed him, and no official cause of death on the death certificate.

“Oh, Riley” I spoke into the dark of my quiet bedroom, “You didn't want to lose Mr. Never, did you? And you deserve some answers, too.”

I try to focus—maybe he has a new lead to follow that we hadn't thought of before, or at least something we could write off as improbable. But that creepy idea kept interrupting, even though I didn't want to think that way.

It couldn't be true—it just couldn't. Things like that didn't happen in our peaceful Australian ski village of Perisher Valley. Did they?

But maybe they did.

9

On Saturday, I'm up at eight am, and switch off the lighthouse lamp before I do anything else. Tending the light is my small contribution to saving the lives of any lost sailors who needed to find their way into the harbor easier, last night. I fuss around tidying up for Riley's arrival. Even polish the banisters again. "Hope I haven't made them too fast." I mutter, peering outside every few minutes. Then finally I catch sight of the Ute as it pulls up, and go flying down the steps, happy to see that long, lanky, body, wearing the usual baseball cap turned back to front.

Riley wears it to hide his hair, which he insists looks like red mud. And of course, he's chewing away on his favorite pen dangling dangerously from a corner of his mouth. How the thing doesn't fall out, I have no idea. He grabs me up in a hug, then realizes the big change.

"Hey—you cut your hair!" He runs his hands through the curls I tried so hard to turn into the "carefree look" this morning. "Don't tell me. It's easier for

swimming. I can tell what you've been up to every day, Jo—you've got a tan already."

A sense of relief washes over me. Everything seems better when Riley's around. "Thanks, Riles. I was worried you wouldn't like it."

"Fits right in with your new location." Then he gazes up at our quirky three level lighthouse. "Wow! Is your old man for real? This place looks like one of the covers of Seascape Magazine. It's totally insane! Trust your dad to trade up. Looks like you've hit the crackpot, girl!" He sighs. "A real lighthouse to live in. Lucky you."

Then he has me smothered against his chest, again, and I can't help holding him just as tight when we've missed each other so much.

"Man, it's a long way up. What's on the top? A bell tower?"

"Kind of. It's a cruisey, old fashioned attic with lots of interesting junk in it. Plus the original lighthouse lamp which I'm taking good care of."

"Fair dinkum? Ripper! I gotta' check that out – but first." He rubs his tummy, then flips his head to one side with a pleading look.

"But first—you're hungry."

"What makes you say that?" His grin is wide and mischievous, like you'd see on a little kid.

"Just a wild guess. Come on, let's eat early lunch first, then you can check everything out."

“Good idea. I can see I’ll need to be running on all cylinders to appreciate the guided tour of this amazing establishment. But don’t sweat it. I’ll give it my personal audit in return. Where’s your mom?”

That throws me, because now I have to explain. “This is one of Mom’s bad days, so she’s still asleep. But that’s okay, because I can show you around just the two of us, and then maybe we can go for a swim after lunch.”

“Except your man spins out when he’s running on empty.”

I love it when he talks like that, and the next minute he’s following me into the kitchen. “Here. Don’t say I never bake for you. Bacon and egg quiche, followed by date muffins. That do you?”

“You’re the bomb, Jo.” He practically drools, then bogs in. “Glad I skipped breakfast, today.”

So, of course, I’m hungry too, now, and we’re both jawing away when his phone rings. He shoves it across to me. With a mouthful like Riley can fit in, there’s no way he should talk and eat.

“Riley Williams’ phone.” I chirp, in my best imitation of a secretary, as he shoves another mouthful in, then laughs at my cheeky reply.

“Is that you, Joanie? It’s EG. Is Riley there yet?”

“Hi, EG—Yes, he arrived half an hour ago. I’ll put you on speakerphone because he’s got a mouthful of muffin right now.”

“No worries. Riley probably told you I've given him some pages of Dad's manuscript to read while he's with you this weekend. I'd be grateful if you two would go over them together.”

Riley nods and attempts to talk with his mouth full but stops when I glare at him.

“You want to talk to him after we've read them?”

“Yes. I'll ring back later.”

“Bye, EG.” Riley shouts to her as he finishes the last of his muffin.

I'm feeling even happier if that's possible, because this may mean we're finally going to start making some progress in figuring out where Ted went from here. Or at least pick up his trail. He can't have spent so much time here and not left a few clues somewhere. Especially in the lab or the little apartment he was staying in. With a whole twenty-four hours together we ought to be able to find something.

Except I can't make myself jump into it right away. It seems like forever since I've had any fun. I watch him open his backpack and wonder if I can talk him into a quick swim. But instead, he takes out a large heavy folder.

“Wow! I recognize that monster.” I say as he dumps it onto the table in front of me.

“How about you give me a quick tour of your place before we get into all this. I need to move around a little

after so much time behind the wheel, anyway. What a place, Jo! Can't wait to see the rest of it." He picks up his plate and takes it to the sink.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Think your mom might wander in while we're gone?" He nods towards the backpack.

"No. But just in case..." I climb up on the kitchen stool and place the folder in a safe spot on top of the cupboards. "Had enough to eat for the moment?" I tease as I climb back down.

"I reckon I can last out until lunch." He frowns as if he's not sure. He is a nut. "Ok. Show me your lighthouse, girlfriend."

"What lunch? You just ate your way through breakfast and lunch!" I put on my agro voice, but I don't mean it. And I love it when he calls me girlfriend.

After a quick tour around inside, plus the guest room downstairs that I fixed up for him, I start to lead the way out the sliding doors that lead to the stone patio and then down to the beach.

"Wow! I can't think of anything you wouldn't like about this place, Jo. Seems with you wanting to study sea life the way you do, living in a lighthouse on your own beach would qualify for your most interesting adventure of the year. Any year."

"It definitely seems to be turning into that. Especially with some of the adventures I've had out in

our cove so far. Gotta admit the house felt sort of creepy, at first. But now I think it's kinda cute and full of mysteries. Gives me plenty to do when I'm lonely. Wasn't Dad clever finding it?"

"I'm starting to think that dude has quite a few hidden talents. Hey! You forgot to show me your room. Or aren't I allowed to see where you spend most of your time?"

I change directions to lead him up the circular staircase, to the second floor. "That's a joke. I have to travel for hours to get to and from school. After which I treat myself to a swim if I'm lucky, then I cook dinner. Oh, and if I'm really having a good day, I get to do my homework. Then I talk to you on the phone before bed. Okay, next door on the right. My royal boudoir, sire."

"Don't start using big words in French. It's hard enough keeping up with you in English."

I push the door open, then stand back with an exaggerated, "Da da!" and let him go first.

Everything is tidy because I knew he was coming. Bed made, floor clean, no dirty clothes lying around. And I purposely left the balcony door open, showing the little drink table and chairs made out of driftwood that make it the perfect place to do homework or just soak up the view. Sure enough, that's the first place he heads for.

Being a typical guy he leans all the way over to look down. Too far, in my opinion. So, I rush over to shoo him

away, leaving the bedroom door to swing shut behind me. When I'm alone I always keep it shut, though Mom comes in and out as she wants. But suddenly I'm very much aware I should leave it open. Especially after that serious talk the youth pastor gave us last year about not setting yourself up for temptations. But I don't want to make a big deal of it, either. When someone has saved your life with hardly a second thought for his own, there isn't much not to trust about them. Then, again, there's no denying Riley and I are as human as the next person no matter what we think about ourselves.

"Interesting." His voice breaks into my thoughts as he's still leaning over the side. "Looks like you got limestone on your foundations, Jo." Then he turns to come back inside.

"This area is full of limestone," I tell him, "considering they have some of the largest limestone caverns in Australia just north of here,"

"That's what the data for my end-term assignment, says, too. Those caves are at the top of my research list for when we make our first house-hunting trip out here. Have to be careful exploring them, though. They're not like our mountain caves back in Perisher. Limestone corrodes after a long time, especially if there's a layer of clay underneath. Having water nearby isn't good, either. Causes washouts. Does Shark Heads get flooded much?"

“Don't know, I'm still too new here. Comes down in torrents when it rains, though. A lot of rainforest close by. You sure seem to know a lot about geology, now.” I flop down in the comfortable overstuffed chair next to a small table that doubles for a lamp stand and stick my feet up on the matching floral print ottoman. “I wish you cared as much about the ocean as you do about the mountains, Rye.”

“I know more about the mountains since I was born and raised on them. But I reckon working for Dazza this summer on the boats and everything—where Arthur spent so much time last year—I'll learn plenty enough to see if it's the kind of place I'd like to stay in, or not. Who knows...” He wanders over to inspect the paintings of Australian bush towns hanging on my wall. “I might even like the bush country after I see the land Mr. Never left to me.”

He comes back to sit in the matching print chair on the other side of the lamp table and stretches his long legs to rest his feet on the ottoman next to mine. But on his way, he stopped long enough to open the door again.

“Not sure I could take the temptation,” he explains. Then he gives me a wink and a smile.

Which proves that Riley is a true gentleman, like his father, and I didn't need to be the one to insist, after all.

“Maybe we should head back down to the kitchen and get to work,” I suggest. “Now that you've seen

where I actually spend the least amount of my time if you don't count the hours I'm asleep."

"Good idea."

In the hallway I throw a quick glance back to Mom's room, farther down, but it's too early for her to be up and about, yet, and the door is still closed. Before the usual panicky feeling about what's really going on with her hits me, I turn around in time to see Riley jump onto the banister and ride it all the way down.

"Man, I reckon you got the fastest banister in Australia." He laughs. "What do you think?"

"It's a little too high and curvy for me," I confess. "I have to go down the safe way. Like riding a horse." I face the hallway and throw a leg over before sailing down backwards.

About the time I'm hoping I don't end up on my backside like when I tried it out this morning, Riley catches me and lets me down easy. Then he reaches for my hand. "The place is awesome, Jo. And that room you fixed up for me is a big upgrade from my bedroom in Perisher Valley, with its top view of an outdoor dunny."

Riley really cracks me up. "Not sorry for you in the least," I tell him. "Being raised by a bunch of bachelors, you're probably as comfortable there as they are. Besides, I wouldn't call this so much of an upgrade. You should see the stuffed fruit bat that was hanging in my room the first day we got here. Ugly enough to cause

nightmares. Ready to see my ocean? Maybe even go for a swim?"

We stopped at the edge of the patio so he could get the full effect and just admire the view a bit.

"It's awesome to look at, all right," he said. "But I'm not too excited about swimming around in it. Not in these parts, Joanie. I wish you wouldn't, either. There's a reason they have shark nets for swimming in certain areas, now. Didn't your dad fill you in on the reputation this town has for shark attacks?"

"He just said I should wait a while to swim in the open ocean. But it was way too tempting. You wouldn't believe how beautiful it is—a whole other world."

"You heard about Port Hacking, only a few miles north of here? I passed it on the drive down."

"No. What about it?"

"Stopped for a soda there, and the guy in the shop told me they've had another great white shark attack just last week. That makes so many they gave the town a new name this year. 'Headless at Hacking.'"

"Okay. I get it. But I have a theory about swimming around sharks, now, Rye. I really don't believe they're just the eating machines people make them out to be. When I get finished with my vacation assignment, I'll have an amazing demonstration of that fact to share with you. But right now why don't we head over to the labs and Dad's office before anyone decides to do a little

weekend work over there. This is supposed to be a working weekend for us, too. Remember?"

"Right. I sort of spun out for a moment with all the vacation atmosphere."

"Yeah, well you've over it, now. On our way you can tell me what you found out about Ted that you couldn't say over the phone, last night."

"OK. But I mean it about the swimming thing, Jo. Don't go in too early in the morning or late in the evening. Hear me?"

I nod. No sense mentioning the early morning swim I had just this week. I already decided to give that time up after the Great White encounter, anyway, and Riley's vote—along with Gideon's prayer—were definitely having an effect. So, I changed the subject. "Do you know why Ted was at Mr. Never's birthday party, last year?"

"Yep."

"Come on then—give. Was he invited? Or did he just show up for some reason." I slip my sandals back on since we're not going down to the beach and turn toward the house.

"Get this. It turns out we were pretty close with our suspicions about what that connection was."

"Something to do with the war?"

He pauses for so long I have to look back and follow his gaze to see why he's still standing there like he's

frozen, staring out at the bay.

“Will you look at that?” He keeps his voice low, like we maybe weren't alone anymore. “A huge fin circling around out there, Jo—see?”

I am so totally tuned into those fins that come and go that I spot it right away. “Wow—that’s a big one! Can you tell what kind it is? Some of them are worse than others.”

“Who cares what kind? That things a monster! I wouldn't set foot in that water if you paid me a hundred smackeros.”

10

Dad's office on the outskirts of Shark Heads is also where his project lab is located. The car park is empty—no signs of life. Good.

“None of the staff is in town this weekend, Rye,” I tell him as we let ourselves into the building. “So we should have all the time we need. Ted and Dad shared an office down here at the end of the hall.”

The place had the distinctive smell of chemicals that usually permeated his offices since they were almost always connected to his labs. Even his office at home had so many specimens of plants and animals that there was always faint aura of it there, too. I switched on the light.

“So which desk do you want to tackle?” I asked. “Dad's is the big one on the right, and Ted's is the one closest to the—”

“Three desks,” Riley observes. “That smaller one is

probably for the new assistant.”

“I guess that makes sense. Dad's as convinced as me that Ted's going to show up with a logical explanation one of these days. So, I don't think he'd let anyone take over his personal desk anytime soon.”

I pull the keys out of my pocket and move around to sit in the big wooden chair with rollers behind Dad's desk. Before I even get the drawer unlocked I notice a gold-tinted, Dresden tea cup next to the hideous old coffee mug he liked to use. I pick it up and carefully turn it around in my hands, admiring the tiny red flowers painted on the sides.

“Hey, Riley. I bet this must be hers because Dad would never drink out of something like this. But why has she parked her cup right next to his when she's got her own desk to work at?”

Riley is wandering around by this time, busily checking the wall shelves, picking up books and shaking them to see if anything drops out. He looks across at the cup I'm holding.

“Dunno. Maybe they were working on something together. Takes a lot of hours to train someone on a big project, I reckon.”

As the senior scientist, Dad's desk was a little larger than the others so would probably be easier to work at if they did have to go through project material. Still, I was pretty sure it would take quite some time before he

would let someone he didn't know well look into the real secrets of their discoveries. Corporate theft was a big deal in the drug industry, no matter how dedicated a scientist might be. Even Ted and Dad—who had worked together for years—were always keeping small things from each other. Checks and balances, maybe. Or a safeguard for if anything happened to either of them. They had even worked out a sort of code between them in case something like that did happen.

Like now.

“You would think she would start out mostly as a sort of secretary and file clerk.” I said more to myself than Riley. “Ted and Dad keep in contact with so many of their colleagues from all over the world, it would almost be a full-time job just doing that. At least for as long as it takes to know they can trust her.”

“Maybe she isn't that much of a stranger.” Riley settles himself at Ted's desk and tries the drawer. “This one's locked, too.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That if Ted and your dad were this suspicious of each other, there's no chance a new assistant would get privileges anytime soon.”

“About her not being a stranger, I meant.”

“Oh. I just meant she might have been in the department for a long time, already, and isn't really new to anyone around there. Just new to this particular

project.”

“I guess.” I wander over to her desk. Not much on it. A pen holder, no computer, a few unused notepads, and a dead flower in a vase. Her drawer is locked, too. Fumbling around with Dad's keys, I try them, but have no luck. All the time thinking how strange for a trainee assistant to be given work that needed to be so safely locked away. Even if she had worked in the department for a while.

Riley starts wrestling with with Ted's desk—as if there might be some board that would pop out a secret drawer or something with the right amount of pressure. But no luck with that, either, and after a few moments he seems annoyed.

I cross the room to open the main drawer with my keys. “We better leave things in the same order when we're done. And even if we do come across anything interesting, we can't take it with us.”

“I wonder if all scientists are this paranoid.”

“Most are. Because it's such a competitive field. On the grand scale of things, anyway. Even though they do tend to collaborate with each other on the major stuff. Mom and I think that's why Dad is a little paranoid, though. It's not always easy to know who you can really trust.”

“Pretty bizarre if you ask me.” He pulled out a receipt book and started flipping through. “Hmm.

Mostly just an expense account for traveling. Might be interesting to see where he's been though."

"But we know exactly where he was before all this happened. He and Dad weren't just partners, they were friends. He was practically one of the family. Spent oodles of time with us. Sometimes even slept over if they were working late on something."

"I thought you said they kept some things from each other."

"Nothing big, really. More like how they used to talk to each other in synonyms half the time. It used to drive me crazy when they did that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they'd use different words with much the same meaning. I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Nothing unusual in here." He dropped the receipt book back in the drawer.

"Let's go try Dad's." We went back to the big desk but when I put the key in, it wouldn't turn. "Jammed," I said.

"Probably just needs some oil. You got any?"

"Not on me, no." I grumble.

"Try squirting some of this around, then." He offers me a small spray bottle he noticed in one of the cubbyholes at the back.

"That's the stuff he cleans his spectacles with."

"So what? It's gonna' loosen the lock. Wait and see."

I give it a squirt and the drawer opens like magic. Nothing but the usual mess of notes and papers, though. So, we go back to Ted's desk. "There has to be something important in here."

"Maybe he kept everything on his computer."

"It was just a laptop and, of course, that vanished with him."

For a moment we just sat quietly. Thinking.

"But There is an advantage to my knowing Ted so well, Riles. He confided to me once that he and Dad never entirely counted on computer encryption as being secure enough. He said they always kept one piece of vital information concerning the case they were working on, somewhere that wasn't on a computer. Ted was a little on the paranoid side, too."

"What a pair."

We start going through the items one more time, when suddenly I glance back towards my father's desk, again. As if my brain was reminding me that I missed something over there. His drawer was stuffed with paperwork. My father was messy but never disorganized. He simply kept things in line with his own way of thinking. But he would never stuff a drawer this way without transferring it over to files or file cabinets. Unless...

I ran my hand along the back of the drawer until I felt a small latch. But it wouldn't flip open, so, I sprayed

more of the spectacle cleaner. Then—bingo—I'm in. The false back lays down to reveal another compartment behind there. An empty one. I run my hands all around it, anyway. "Hey—I found something!"

"What is it?" Riley's looking over my shoulder in a couple of seconds.

"I don't know. It's a..." I look closer at the small page and read a line or two. "It's a loose page from Ted's little red diary! It's what he uses to record all his regular phone numbers, email addresses, and other information in."

"Now we're getting someplace, girlfriend. We better hurry up, though. For some reason my creep meter just went off."

But I hardly hear him, as I study the tiny handwriting. "Here it is, Rye! On the very last line. It's just two words. Ghost Gum."

Riley frowns, then screws his face up. "What the heck does that mean?"

"I'm not sure but I think it's some kind of tree. But I can't help thinking I've heard it somewhere else, lately. Something familiar about it."

"Let's take it back to your place and figure it out. We've already been here too—"

"Shhh!" I grab his arm. "I heard something in the hallway."

"What?"

"Someone's in the hall," I whisper. "Maybe

listening to us!”

“I thought you said no-one would be—”

A woman suddenly appears in the doorway and she doesn't look pleased.

“That can't be her.” I hiss. I can't imagine a woman with that kind of scowl drinking out of a cup with such dainty roses on it

“Way too old,” he whispers back.

“Okay, you two.” She walks towards us. “What do you think you're doing?”

I'm mentally trying to prepare my story—any story.

Riley heads over toward her. “We're just looking for some aspirin, ma'am. My girlfriend has a terrible headache.” He swings back around to me with a fake smile, obviously waiting for me to back him up.

“I was uh...checking Dad's desk for some. He usually keeps it in here.”

That stops her in her tracks. “Joanie? You Dr. Thomas's daughter?”

“Yes, I am. Nice to meet you. Oh well, no aspirin. Guess I'll just have to wait until I get home.”

Riley reaches for my hand, and we both walk rather briskly past her. In the hallway there's a trolley full of cleaning materials with a full bucket of water on the floor. Once we get outside though, we both crack up, totally.

“It was only the cleaning lady!” Riley laughs, again.

“I was worried she might find some aspirin and I'd be forced to take it just to make your story true.” A few minutes later, we were climbing into his Ute and heading back to the lighthouse.

“You should have brought that whole address book home, too, Jo.” He turned serious once we left the town behind. “Ted's not around to need it and we might find another clue in there. It might even have some sort of code to what those words mean.”

“But it wasn't there. Just this one paper that's been torn out. I only recognized it because I've seen his handwriting so often. He must have the book with him.”

“Either that or someone else does.”

“If someone at the office was involved in Ted's disappearance, they may be looking for the last page, too. They might even have more information than we do to work with. Anyway, we better try and figure out what it means as fast as we can. Because my creep meters going like crazy all of a sudden, too. Ghost Gum...Ghost Gum...”

“Hey...hey, Jo...”

“What?”

“I think I've heard that phrase before, too. It was something Mr. Never said. Not sure just when or why but it's an odd phrase so it stuck in my mind.”

“Why didn't you ask him about it then?”

“He was always muttering things to himself as we

worked in the dog yard. Mostly stuff left over from his war days. All kinds of things that meant something to him back then. I felt it would be sort of intruding on his private thoughts to ask him about any of it. I really don't think he even knew he was saying things out loud most of the time."

"Then, maybe we really can find some answers in those diary pages about Ted and him. There's a connection there, Rye—I just know it!"

"We better quit wasting time and start reading that thing. I don't know what's come over me since I got here. You'd think the summer holiday started already."

Then he got quiet all of a sudden and I thought maybe he was thinking about Mr. Never, again, which still made him sad whenever those kind of memories popped up. Any other time I could cheer him out of it. But teasing or joking around like we'd been doing all day didn't seem right or respectful at moments like these. Which reminded me there are places people go sometimes that no one else can follow. Even if they are more important than anyone else to you.

"You're my holiday, Jo." He spoke like he knew what I was thinking and reached across the seat to hold my hand. "Thanks for always being there for me."

Then again, maybe you could go with them a ways...if they let you.

11

Back in the kitchen, we sat with a few pages of the partially sorted manuscript in front of us, along with a packet of savory biscuits and tea to keep up our spirits.

“Do you think we could ever talk E.G. into coming here for a visit, Rye?” I'm concentrating on staying subtle so he won't catch on to the real purpose of the invitation.

“Dunno'. She might. Since she can always catch up with me in Perisher Valley, you'd have to have a good reason to get her to come this far. She'd come to see Dad, though. Maybe when his contract is up and we actually move out here. Why, what are you thinking?”

I'm trying to decide if I should just say it. Because ever since the three of us were tumbled together on the day Mr. Never died, EG and I became a lot more than just student and teacher. But after the tough times I've seen Riley go through every time the subject of Mr. Never comes up I didn't want to bring that awful day to his

remembrance, again. I also wasn't ready to confide my suspicions to him until they were confirmed. Not only did he love Mr. Never like a grandfather, he felt like EG was part of his family, too. So, once more, I decided just to change the subject instead of answer.

"We would have been a lot farther along with this thing if Dad hadn't made us move, again." I complained. "Here, let's start with the stuff she's already clipped together. Obviously, it's important somehow."

"Okay. Bring your chair close to mine, and put the pages in the middle. Might have to wait for me to catch up occasionally. I only have one speed when I read and that's slow. Sorry about that." He folds the pages over so we're starting at the top.

I'm immediately shocked at what I see. Because here—right in front of us—is the big surprise we have both been waiting for.

"Oh man! No wonder it's in a mess." Riley declares a few seconds later when he discovers the same thing. "This isn't just the manuscript Mr. Never was working on for the last couple years. It's a diary of some kind. Like the one Arthur stole when he came up here."

"You're right! Look, it's even the same handwriting. No wonder the pile looks so much bigger than when we found it, last year. There's been a lot more other stuff added to it, too. I bet it was written years ago."

Riley picked up the second group of pages and read

a few of the first lines, too. "Oh, my gosh, Jo!" he stood up so fast his chair tipped over. "We're onto it, Joanie—finally! And we were right about his connection with Ted, too!" He picked up the chair and sat down, again. "Look at this." He shoved the second group of pages in front of me. "It has to be a war connection. See? Mr. Never wrote these pages from the trenches. During the Second World War!"

"Oh, Rye, let's keep reading!"

"Long as we're together, let's read it out loud. Same as we did the last one. You go ahead, you're faster than me."

"Okay. Here goes..."

Tuesday 12th November 1943

Bert copped one in the chest today. Dead by the time he hit the ground, poor blighter. That makes fourteen diggers gone, but we survived the Japs' final attack on Darwin. Lost a Lockheed Hudson, too. Knew the crew. Swore they'd rather die than be captured – and that's what they did. No medicine left now. Just us doing what we can for the wounded.

Wednesday 13th November 1943

Told the Captain number three Hudson's gearbox is stuffed. Wouldn't give you five bob for her at the moment. Captain sure was happy later when I got 'er fixed. 'God

bless you, Eddie,' he says. 'Get them boys home.' I will. No Aussie digger's gonna' die in this stinkin' rat hole while I've got breath left in me.

Thursday 14th November 1943

Ted's crook with dengue fever. Lies there sweating like a stuck pig. Gave him a few sips of water, wishin' I had some aspirin, too. Ted smiles, but says nuthin.' He knows the drill.

"No dates, now, Rye. Just the places."

"Okay, go on."

"MILNE BAY

Everyone else is evacuated except for the wounded. Ted's skinny as a rail post but his fever's broken. Japs cleared out to one of the other islands, so we're headed to Darwin in the morning. If I kin keep the old girl in the air.

DARWIN:

Stewie held on half the night. Made a wooden cross, then buried him under a shady tree. The rest of us made it to Darwin, where Norm, Bertie and Ted got beds in the hospital. Talked with Ted before I left. Real happy he'll live to see his son grow up, now. Swears he'll march every Anzac day in Sydney in memory of our mates who

didn't make it. Told me I better march with him."

I glance over at Riley and can't miss the admiration in his eyes.

"I love hearing about his war service," he says. "Did you know New Guinea was where the Americans and our Air Force used to launch raids on Japanese Aircraft Carrier ships? The ones carrying planes to attack Darwin. No wonder Mr. Never hardly ever missed an Anzac day service. He used to say how great it was to see all his old Air Force mates again."

"Mr. Never was very brave. We're lucky people like him fought for us in the war, aren't we?"

"You bet. He told me the battle to save Australia was actually won in Darwin, which is why I want to know more about it. I'll ask EG if she's come across any extra info about the war."

"Well, we know it had a happy ending, because he came home, raised a family, and you got to know him. Riley,"

"Mr. Never wrote that part in New Guinea, Jo. I remember him talking about some of that stuff. Is that it? Is there any more?"

"Looks like the next few entries were made after he got home. Let's keep going."

"Anzac day the following year, Ted, Norm and I

march in Sydney as planned. Later years, Ted brung his son Ted Jr. along too. Norm quit coming after awhile, That final time, I hear Ted tell his son. "I want you to remember Edward Never, son. The best pilot this side of the black stump. Flew us from Milne Bay to Darwin in a plane held together with spit 'n gum. Edward Never needs you, my boy, drop whatever you're doing and help."

Bit unfair askin' a teenage kid to promise his life away. But Ted Jr. will soon forget my ugly mug.

After the war, me 'n two of me old mates, Charlie Williams and old Arthur, ran sled-dogs in Perisher Valley. Turned it into a good business, too. Then the Missus died, so I raised EG on me own. Missed a few Anzac day marches those years, but most April 25th I'd get me uniform out, dust the medals off, and catch a train to Sydney. Blow me down, if one year Ted Jr. don't turn up again wearing his father's medals.

Sad to hear me old mate Ted had passed on. Ted Jr. reckons his old man reminded him of me at the end. "And I haven't forgotten you, Mr. Never." he grins and slaps me on the back. Tells me he's a Doctor working in medical research, now. Drove me to the station afterward, and just before the train pulls out, he shoves a card in me hand . "A Griffiths man always pays his debts, so if ever you need me, please call." Then he shakes me hand and says. "Dad lived for forty years

after the war, Mr. Never, and you gave him those years.”

Had me bawling like a baby on the train home. Riley's waiting at the station – he's like a grandson to me, now. Helps me with the dogs, cause I'm wearing out fast. Maybe I will ask Ted for help after all. Invite him to the 75th birthday bash EG's giving me. See if there's anything he kin do.

Heaps of tests. Research doctors sure is fussy blokes. Keeping busy writing my life story. Few things I need to pass on. Secrets I kept to myself too long. Ted, you put your boy on the job, and by crikey he's as determined a critter as his old man was. Called me this morning. Says my sickness is what they been working on. Got a new cure, if I'm willing to try it. What have I got to lose?”

I stop reading, again.

Riley looks up from wherever his thoughts have taken him. “Is that all?”

“That's all in this batch.” I pick up the next few pages out of the pile that are clipped together.” This next part is marked 'medical.’ I take a deep breath and plunge in.

“MEDICAL:

“Ted's cure worked, and he's over the moon. Can't stop old age setting in, but other than that I'm back in business. Ted wouldn't accept nuthin' in payment. Only says he's saving every penny to buy land at Ghost Gum

Gully—"

"Ghost Gum Gully!" I practically shout the words before remembering Mom was probably getting ready to come downstairs any minute, and put my hand over my mouth.

"It's a place!" Riley whispers. "Now, we're getting somewhere! Keep reading."

I look for where I left off and start reading more quietly this time.

"Ghost Gum Gully, where something grows they need in the cancer research they're doing. The bloke what owns the land won't let Ted have access. I'm gonna buy that land for him, today. I'll leave it to Riley, and he kin see Ted gets all the access to that cancer stuff he needs. As for me, I'm sitting here at me desk, taking it easy today, waiting for the boy to come over. Now's the time to explain it all to him. Someone's knocking at the door but I'll let EG answer it. Isn't Riley, he knows to just come right in. Still knocking. Maybe EG is off somewhere. Better get up and see."

"The next part's just a hasty scribble, Rye. It says,

"I'll put this away for tomorrow. Just looked out the

window. Stone the crows, it's...but it can't be!.He's..."

"That's all there is," I tell him. "He never finished the sentence. Whoever it was—"

Riley's head drops to the table and I know we were both thinking the same thing. Whoever interrupted Mr. Never that last day...

Could have killed him.

12

Our time together passed way too quick, especially since Riley had to leave before lunch the next day to get back to Perisher Valley at a decent hour. Having him there made such a difference on my whole outlook that even our old lighthouse was starting to feel more like home to me. And even though we both still had serious things to settle in our families before we could even think about just hanging out like normal kids, having him to lean on when times got hard made them easier to deal with, somehow.

I didn't even have to explain anything to him about Mom. By the time she finally put in an appearance at dinner, then left early during movie and popcorn time, I didn't need to. And about the time I was trying to think up a good excuse for her, he asked, "Want to know what the one good thing about having to stand in for some of the adults in your life is, Jo?"

"Is there one?" I took a sip of my soda and didn't look

him in the eye because I felt frustrated enough to cry just then.

“The freedom that comes with it. Like not having them lean over your shoulder every minute telling you what to do. Know what I mean?”

I was about to say I didn't think that would be so bad compared to everything else when he suddenly tossed the bowl of popcorn we were sharing up into the air and caught it, again, sending a shower of popcorn down all around us. Which put us into fits of laughter as we went to picking it all up. Disaster mood averted, Riley style. Later, when I would have probably stayed up till all hours just talking and enjoying his company, he did the honorable thing, again.

“Okay, girlfriend. How about we hit the sack now?” he said after the end of the movie and we had moved into the kitchen so I could clean up the snack things.

“What about that next session of manuscript reading we were going to do later?”

“I have a hard enough time with that stuff without going to bed on it. Tell you what.” He steps up on the stool to get it down from the shelf, splits it in half, leaving some in the box and setting the rest aside for me. “Reckon the only way we can get through the whole thing before Christmas, is if we divide the work. That way we go twice as fast. Maybe even come up with some hard evidence about this Ghost Gum Gully place we

came across.”

“That sounds better to me, too, Rye. Getting into all of it, again, has been kind of a downer when we haven't seen each other for so long. But reading the sections, then discussing what we find on the phone might give us an idea where to look in time for the next time we get together.”

“You got it.” He snatches up his baseball cap. “Sweet dreams, Jo. Make some of them about me.” He plants a gentle kiss on my lips, then heads for his bedroom, careful not to let things get too tempting between us with all this alone time on our hands. Honorable.

That moment was enough to send me to sleep with ripples of pleasant thoughts later, each time I remembered it instead of the dark worries and suspicions that seemed to plague me whenever I turned the lights out and tried to sleep, lately. It shrank all my problems down to a more manageable size, somehow. Riley Williams might joke and tease a lot but deep down he was dead serious when he had to be. He also had more strength than you would believe could come from someone so tall and thin if a situation turned dangerous, too. I had definitely seen that enough times.

In the morning after breakfast, I can't help but notice that he has the strangest look on his face. I can't read it, and I can nearly always pick up on his moods. Did he

have a hard time sleeping, after all, and pick up his part of the manuscript, again? Or was it just that our wonderful weekend was over for us and he was feeling as bumed as me at having to be apart from each other?

“Here's the take-away I promised you.” I handed him the lunch I fixed to take on the road.

“Thanks, Jo. Want to know what I'm gonna be thinking about while I drive?”

“What?”

“First, I'm going to find out exactly where that land is—and I'll do with it just what Mr. Never wanted me to.” Then he frowns, as if there's something unpleasant about it that he's leaving out.

“Of course you will. Mr. Never knew he could trust you.”

That must have been what he needed to hear, anyway, because he takes my hand as we walk out the door and across the front yard to his Ute. “I was lucky to have those years with him. Reading those pages it felt like it was only yesterday we walked the dog yard together.”

“I know how much you miss him, Rye.” I squeeze his hand, then loop my arm through his.

“Yeah, and it turns out he was even more of a hero than I thought. No way am I going to let him down. I'm gonna' sleuth out everything I can about his life. I'd write his story myself if I was good enough. But I promise you

this, girlfriend—if these pages turn up that someone did Mr. Never wrong—that bludger is going to have me to answer to.”

“Okay, and now who's acting like Sherlock?” I tease, trying to pull him out of his grim mood. “But think about it. How strange is it that these two mysteries we thought were so different, last year, are turning out to be connected? It's like we were involved before we ever knew each other.”

“Yeah, considering it started out more like a 'you help me with mine and I'll help you with yours' type deal. Isn't until we meet in the middle we find out we're both trying to unravel the same thread. Sure am glad I met you, Jo.”

“Me, too.”

I lean in to kiss his cheek through the open car window, but instead he puts a hand behind my head and draws me into a kiss that sends shivers through me. Then he let's go as if he just got hold of himself.

“Sorry, I couldn't resist.” There's a flash of fun in his eyes again, and I know he'll be okay. “Hang in there, girl. Before you know it, you'll be playing tour director to Dad, Ashlee and me. We want to see all Shark Heads has to offer, too, so get the drum from someone who knows. And Jo...”

“What?”

“Your new haircut looks nice. Brings out those big

green eyes. Still soft and curly, too. Which I really like.”
He starts the motor.

“Thanks, Rye. Do you realize every time we work as a team, we get answers faster? I mean when we're focused on the mysteries it feels like we're on a mission together. Like we're doing something good in the world.”

“You got that right. I never seem to come up with the same superior brilliance when I'm on my own, running dog teams through the woods, and trying to sort stuff out in my head, though. Must mean you're smarter than the dogs. Except for Ding, of course. ”

“Very funny. But talking about Ding, why don't you bring him with you next time? He could come with us when we go touring, couldn't he? ”

“He'd like that. I'll see if I can talk Dad into it.”

I back away as he guns the Ute down the road for the long drive to Perisher Valley, smiling and waving. Until he turns onto the main road from our driveway that is, and I can't see him anymore. But I decide—right at that moment—I am not going to let myself feel down about him leaving. Instead, I'm going to feel over the moon happy because he's coming back.

Not more than fifteen minutes later, I'm down at the beach ready for my swim.

The surf is incredible today. And I settle into my favorite stroke, feeling strong and full of energy as I

power through the waves but being much more careful to stay close in to shore. My mind is in overdrive with my new resolve to come up on top of life instead of the bottom, in future. To quit worrying so much about Mom and spend more time talking to the Lord about the situation, instead. If He can help me out of my own dark moods, He can do the same for her. From now on, prayer will be my first resort instead of my last one.

I so miss going to Perisher youth group meetings. The kids there were all open and friendly, ready to hash over problems anyone needs to talk about. I'm pretty sure Grace and Gideon are that way, too. I just need to get to know them a little better to find out. Maybe I won't have to wait until the youth group meetings to do that since we are all working together on our assignments, now. Even Gideon will be getting the credit he earns by using our video as his special assignment in his photography and film class. They keep telling me it will be worth waiting to see because it's turning into something as special as my mission.

That's when it hits me how wonderful it is that the Lord brought us together. And how much better these friends are for me than the ones in the closed little circles I was trying to break into just to have someone to talk to. Not better than everyone else, just better for me because we are such a perfect fit for each other and have so much in common. No panic attacks in the last few days, either.

Except during that major incident with the Great White but a person would have to be dead not to let something like that upset them.

I take a deep breath of fresh air and dive beneath the waves.

Pretty soon I have company. Porpoise, most likely. Stop kidding yourself, Joanie Thomas. You're looking for your Bull shark that put his life on the line to rescue you. Was it just a short confrontation—long enough for me to get away safe—before he darted away somewhere? If only I could catch a glimpse of him just to know he was okay. He has to be alive! I want to say thanks, somehow. Then I decide I better quit thinking about that in case it's only dream logic. I'm not going to give him up for dead, though.

Not for a long time, yet. He doesn't show up every day, anyway. Which tells me he must have a wide territory he cruises around and my cove is one of the many stops on his usual circuit. Then, again, it was amazing—miraculous even—how he showed up at the exact right moment to protect me. I'll never forget it. And even if I only have the smallest bit of it on that film to remember him by, I'll cherish it for the rest of my life.

“Please come back, shark,” I think to myself as I scan a full circle around the area. “At least let me know you're all right and still out there...”

Then, just as my heart takes a dive at the emptiness,

I spot him! Am I imagining it? Might not be the same shark. But it's definitely a Bull Shark and he's heading my way. If it is him, my theories could be moving closer to being fact.

I stop. Barely treading water, staying as still as I can. As he gets closer, he slows down. Do those eyes hold recognition?

Suddenly he speeds up, moving with a purpose. Everything is too fast—only a blur of movement and I can't see that unique torn fin clear enough to be sure it's the same one. Then all at once, I find myself sucking wind as my reflexes click in and some innate part of my brain reminds me exactly what a shark's intentions can be when they swim directly at something so fast. This shark may be in attack mode!

My “flight or fight” response kicks in and I turn to swim back into the shallows, full throttle, no matter how motionless and calm I'm supposed to stay.

Except—to my horror—I've drifted too far away to make it.

13

He's almost on top of me. "You recognize me, don't you shark?" My mind challenges him, while I steel myself to stay rooted to the spot—only the tips of my fingers and toes move, persuaded by the movement of the water. It flashes through my mind Joan of Arc probably felt like this every time she rode into battle. No idea if she would live or...

An incoming tide attempts to push me back but I hold my place, determined to make eye contact, like when I was in the lagoon. They say animals cannot look very long into the eyes of a human without recognizing their dominance and then turning away. But he swims by, too fast to see his face. I turn around to look. Already, he's headed back in my direction. And this time, instead of fear, I feel a surge of relief wash over me at the sight of that jagged fin. It is my shark!

Suddenly, I'm in the zone. Totally free of that awful, suffocating anxiety as he circles around slowly, closer and closer. Then, at the very last second, our eyes meet before he finally swims away. Wow, am I wired! He

meant that as a hello! When he's out of sight, I feel myself shaking with the intensity of the encounter and it's all I can do to turn around and catch a ride to shore.

I drop onto the warm sand and just lay there for a few minutes, trying to process what just happened. "You missed a great opportunity, girl," I tell myself when I get up to towel myself dry. "It isn't doing your shark friends any good if you only look at this stuff through your own lens. From now on, you don't even go in for a quick swim without that camera clipped to your mask. We need documentation! Nobody in the world will believe your theory about sharks unless we get it. Nothing is science until it's documented. Remember? Quit playing around and get serious!"

What an experience!

Beach towel tied around my waist, I'm weary but happy as I make my way up the long steps to our back door. Stepping inside, I hear Mom talking on the phone to someone and—assuming it's Dad—I feel a jolt of guilt about swimming in the ocean when he told me not to. But instead, she points sternly at my feet. Oops. I'm tracking sand and seawater all over the floor, again. I bend down to sop up my mess with the towel, and, as I do, I catch the drift of her conversation.

"Your end-term assignments? Joanie hasn't said anything about those. What sort of places do you need to see?"

I can hardly believe it, Riley hasn't even got home, yet, and he's on the phone, trying to talk Mom into joining us on the trip. Well, good luck with that, I think. I grab a banana from a basket on the counter, then sit down on the stool next to her at the breakfast bar.

One thing about my Mom—somehow she always manages to fake it, socially. I've never quite been able to figure that one out. I mean, here she is in the kitchen, fully dressed, but with bedspread marks on her cheeks, looking sort of disheveled, with her hair in a mess. Yet, she's chatting away with Riley like any other normal person. More than normal, actually, since she has the kind of voice everyone likes to listen to and always comes across as caring. Maybe she feels a bit sorry she left in the middle of the movie he picked out, last night.

I hear him switch to his familiar, confidential tone. “Mostly local trips, Mrs. T. Maybe a night here and there. Joanie and I plan to finish researching our end-term school assignments. Mine is on limestone and the effect it has on the environment, and Joanie's is....well, it's...”

“It's history actually, Mom,” I tell her as I peel my banana. I'm always starving after a swim. “Heroes of long ago.” Very clever of me to push that word since I know history was a pet subject of hers back when she went to school. Then I lean toward the phone, speaking in a louder voice. “Hi, Riles! You missed a great swim

today—wait till I tell you about it.”

“Like I didn't guess you'd be wet before I turned the corner.” he jokes. “You're just in time to explain that history assignment to your mom, Jo. The one that's gonna' count for a major part of your final grade.”

“A major part?” Mom frowns at me when she says that. “You should have mentioned that before, Joanie. I wouldn't want to keep you from doing your very best on something as important as that. But how is exploring the area around here going to help you, Riley?”

“There's some limestone caves in the Shark Heads area which are gonna' be real helpful in my research.” His voice moves into the room as I reach over to push the speaker button. “And Dad seems to think Shark Heads is a dead ringer for the area in France where Joan of Arc lived, too. Right, Jo?”

“Correct. Joan grew up in a small town called Domremy. But her greatest battle took place in Orleans – that's where her army had its most outstanding victory.” I recite one of the lines from the biography I was reading. “I've done a lot of research, Mom, and now I'm trying to immerse myself in what it felt like to be Joan of Arc, back then.”

“She'll get top marks for it, I reckon, Mrs. T.” Riley interjects. “She even cut her hair off to get in character.”

That part suddenly seems so silly I feel guilty, yet,

when Mom turns to me I can almost see tears in her eyes. “Joanie, dear, I had no idea. Your father would be so proud of you trying to replicate the way a real-life heroine lived in the fifteenth century. You know how fervently he believes in research. And he certainly wouldn't want me to stand in the way of you excelling at school. So...” She sighs, like it's one of the hardest decisions of her life. “For that reason...”

My heart is in my toes, with my stomach feeling like it wants to join it, when she takes a long pause then finishes, “Maybe I could give it a try.”

I can't believe it. “You mean we can go? Oh, Mom—it means so much to me!” I give her a big hug before I remember I'm still wet.

“Joanie—for heaven sake!” She looks down at the wet splotch on her shirt. “Get some dry clothes on!”

I might have been ashamed for Riley to hear her talking to me like a little kid but I'm so happy to have a bit of my old mom back I don't even care. Besides, he's seen me at my ultimate worst already, so there isn't much he doesn't know about me.

“I had no idea it meant so much to you, Joanie. Your dad would definitely want me to go. I know he would. So, yes. I'll go touring with you all.”

Her voice is so gentle and caring I feel like curling up in her lap for a cuddle. She's coming! Riley and I will have a ball, sightseeing—swapping ideas for our

assignments—and I'll not only be able to to get a feel for what eastern France might be like, I'll attempt to stand up for something bigger than myself for a change. What better place to fight for the rights of sharks than one of the most popular shark hunting grounds in Australia? But I decide not to broadcast that part of the assignment just yet.

Riley says a quick goodbye and I know it's because he wants to get off the phone before she changes her mind. My Mom is coming, and I'm over the moon. She will be out of the lighthouse for a few days and maybe even find something she likes about Shark Heads, too. Stranger things have happened. I was crazy to be so against it when Dad first brought up the idea of living here. It really does match our quirky family.

“Joanie, I am curious about something.”

“Yes, Mom?” I'm listening but at the same time my thoughts are all over the place. “Want to come for a walk? It's nice outside.”

“Not today, dear, though I will sometime soon. Right now, I'm curious about what influenced you to choose Joan of Arc for your early days heroine. The poor girl—persecuted by enemies and friends—betrayed in the end by her own king and parliament. Why, the Catholic church, itself, deemed her a heretic, and burned her at the stake. It's all so depressing.”

Mom's words fill me with despair. I've avoided

thinking about that part because Joan means so much to me. A lot more than Mom understands. More than anyone understands. But she's right and just the thought of her being burned alive by people she fought to save almost makes me feel ill. How could they turn on her like that?

I've been so tuned in to trying to rise to her level of commitment and bravery that I've blocked all the rest of that stuff out of my mind. Why do I relate to her so much? Then an even worse thought comes to me. What if my subconscious is acting like a magnet for the same type of things to happen to me? Maybe one shark—by some quirk of nature or that strange turn of events—had become my friend. But there were thousands of others out there who weren't. What if all my “field research” really was nothing more than putting my life at stake every day? That would be terrible!

But I can't believe it. I won't believe it! Okay, not every shark in the ocean is my mate. My shark and I are friends because of what we experienced together—we have a bond of trust. But who knows what's in the mind of every other shark when they're cruising along and suddenly decide to strike at lightning speed? Could it be nothing more than an impulse—instead of something they actually think out?

A lot of shark attack victims have survived because the shark realized what they bit into wasn't a seal or some

floundering sea creature, and left them alone. But it's also true that some of them are rogues who don't stick to normal behaviors. The ones that will hunt anything that moves. Which suddenly makes me realize how unusual it is to have a shark friend. They are—by nature—more indifferent than friendly.

Same as a lot of other wild things, on land. Or some people if you want to take things that far. All of which strengthens my resolve to get more scientific. I should even develop some control studies if I want to document how many sharks I can actually become familiar with. And whether they hunt more on impulse than thought. Important factor, there.

Next thing I know, my mind is churning with ideas on how to actually turn a section of that lagoon into my own private laboratory. Maybe I can rig up a net across it and set up an area where I can observe without being in so much danger. That way, they could observe me at the same time—maybe even become used to my presence. Enough to eventually allow me to swim anywhere I want. I have a feeling they would tolerate me just because I was something familiar even if we weren't the best of friends. Especially if they have some sort of natural indifference built into their nature. I could even go one step farther and—

“Joanie!”

I snap out of my daydream and connect with Mom's

gaze. “What?”

“You had the exact expression your father gets when he finally figures something important out. I bet you didn’t hear a word I just said.”

“Sure I did, Mom. It was about Joan of Arc. How her own people turned on her, and stuff. I guess it could happen to anybody who doesn’t watch who they hang out with.”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“I mean, it isn’t always easy to tell who the good guys really are, even among your own friends. Whether you’re human, or not.”

“Human or not—Joanie, for heaven sake! You’re not getting into that morbid zombie fad, are you?” She heads for the stove.

“Zombies—Oh, Mom, that is too funny! How could I, having a Dad that’s a scientist?”

Next thing I knew we were laughing together, just like old times.

“Well, I thought we were talking about Joan of Arc,” she finally answered. “And the next thing I knew you were saying something about things being human, or not.”

“No worries about me there. Except I have to admit I don’t think of Joan of Arc as dead.”

“What?”

“Considering I can still learn a lot from her, I mean.

You know, her courage, dedication and all that.” I toss my banana peel toward the trash can, but miss. “There's a lot more to her than being burned at the stake at nineteen.”

Mom's words ring true, though, and I'm seriously rattled at the similarities between us. Joan won all her battles except one. And in the end, the sharks turned on her, too. They were the rogues, hunting down anything that was pure and good, merely to dispose of it. Anyway, that's how I see things. I might have to face something like that myself, someday—maybe everybody does. Maybe there's no avoiding it.

So, for the first time I allow my mind to go to where Joan was ultimately forced to go. I can't do anything about her life being cut short. But I can honor her memory by trying to live my own life with the same kind of courage she had. I can try to do something more with my life than just live it for myself. Something worthwhile. Like trying to make our world better by helping my sea friends.

Now just might be time for me to bring out the heavy equipment in order to prove what's most captured my imagination. I'll certainly draw attention to myself in the process but before I'm finished, I could be recognized from one end of Australia to the other.

As “Shark Girl!”

14

“Shark Girl” had just completed her swim in the lagoon the following day when Gideon and Grace show up unexpectedly. I’m standing on our beach toweling myself dry, and look up to see them stepping carefully over the rocks at the side of our lighthouse. Gideon grins and Grace waves a DVD over her head. Finally!

I rush to meet them.

“Wait till you see it, Jo,” Grace gives me a hug without a care in the world that I’m wet. “It’s going to make you famous, I just know it!”

“Well, you’ve spent enough time on it to win an award!” I answer.

“That’s the idea, Gideon says. “Trying to get noticed by one of those nature film companies, myself. But it’s still not quite done.”

“We need you to do some voice overs,” Grace explains. “So, we have to stay after school, tomorrow, and use the sound studio above the auditorium. Gideon will drive us back so we don’t have to be in a rush to

finish.”

“Wow, that ought to be fun. I've never done anything like a voice over before but I'll give it my best shot. I can't wait to see it. Besides giving me some good ideas for exactly what I want to say, I'm hoping we got some footage of my shark friend actually trying to save me. Any hints?”

“We'll let you decide for yourself,” Gideon teased without even giving a clue.

“Come on inside and I'll bring some snacks up to the attic so we can take notes and brainstorm.”

“The attic?” Grace stuck the DVD back into her yellow beach tote that I was pretty sure had her swim stuff in it. I could tell by the familiar outline on the side of the bag.

“It isn't as bad as it sounds,” I motioned for them to follow me up the back steps. “I've actually got it fixed up pretty nice up there. With a TV and everything.

“Hmm...” Gideon closed the slider behind him after Grace and I traipsed through the dining room ahead. “It wouldn't be because you don't want your mom to see you swimming with sharks, would it?”

Man, this guy had a way of bringing the heart of something right out into the open. What could I say? I'd have to lie to deny it. And I wasn't about to start off our friendship like that. “True. But I'll have you know I actually made an exploratory tour around my lagoon

today, to see if I could rig up some kind of a safety net so I can observe from a safer position without compromising my experiments.”

“Good on you!” He laughed like it was me that won instead of him. “I knew if the Lord tapped you on the shoulder you’d listen.”

“We’ve been praying for you,” Grace admitted. “That Great White experience was a real wake-up call for me, too. The way he plowed into that boat...” She took the bowl of fruit and bag of chips I handed her while I headed to the refrigerator for drinks. “I don’t think I’ll ever feel totally safe just floating around on my surfboard, again. That thing was actually trying to knock us into the water.”

“A couple more hits like that and he would have,” Gideon said. “I seriously think the Lord was protecting us. I might even share it in church on Sunday.”

“Oh, I hope not,” I told him. “I’m having a hard enough time convincing people around here that they aren’t all monsters.”

“Um...newsflash,” Grace informed me, “that really was a monster.”

“You’re right. Scared the daylights out of me, too. Especially before you guys hauled me back into the boat. Soda, tea, or lemonade?”

“Lemonade and tea mixed together for me,” Gideon replied.

"I'll take a soda," Grace said.

So, I grabbed two cans, poured Gideon's mix into a glass, and we started upstairs. Which was the last normal thing I remember doing. Because the next twenty minutes were some of the most emotional moments I've ever had. Like a dream coming to life in front of my eyes. Like everything I'd ever wanted to do was coming true at once.

Shark Girl just got real.

The first thing that hit me was the music. It wasn't the kind you'd expect from video footage like that. I mean, we're all familiar with the danger beats that blast you whenever something frightening moves onto the screen. But this stuff was hauntingly beautiful. It literally sounded the way I felt when I was swimming around down there. The awesomeness and wonder of it all.

"Grace picked it out," Gideon said. "I think she nailed it, don't you?"

All I could do was nod because at that point, I couldn't say a word.

"You're the one who made it fit just right into the clip, though," she replied. "It wouldn't have been so dramatic without the perfect timing of your editing."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm pretty pleased with the results, myself." He looks at her with his heart in his eyes, which makes me lonely for Riley. Then he starts talking, again. "Now, Joanie, I'm thinking you would

start talking right about at this point.” He moved closer to the screen so he could point at various places. “After we’ve seen the turtle and other fish swimming along in the same frame as that shark in the distance there.”

“Oh, my gosh!” I gasped. “I never even spotted that one. And there’s another right behind it.”

“I think you were zoned in on the dolphins just then. Look...here they are coming in from the left.. Then we cut away from your head cam for one of our long shots to show how really big they are compared to you. See? Pretty amazing all by itself.”

“They were so close I could have touched them.”

“But I actually think it was more dramatic that you didn’t,” Grace observed. “It really demonstrates your statement about everybody accepting each other without actually getting into each other’s space.”

“It’s absolutely fantastic,” I breathed almost reverently. “I had no idea we could get shots like this.”

“Wait till you see what’s coming next.” Gideon stepped even closer to the screen and put his finger on a fast moving shadow coming out of the distance.”

“That’s him—that’s my shark!” I jumped up from the blue ottoman where I was sitting and Grace laughed out loud at my excitement but I couldn’t help it.

Then it was happening all over, again, right in front of me. That nudge of recognition as he passed by...I even caught a glimpse of the torn fin. Within seconds the

Great White moved into the frame. Slow at first, and then with a sudden lightning speed. Flash to another long shot and my stomach does a flip flop when I realize how huge that dangerous shark was—how big they both were—next to me. Why hadn't I ever realized that before? I must have been frozen into some sort of hypnotic fascination, or at the very least, the onset of that state they call the “rapture of the deep.” I should have been frightened out of my wits getting so close to those creatures. Especially when they started fighting.

There were only seconds of that part because we had all gone into panic mode by then. A mere flash of me swimming away from them as they thrashed and spun furiously, and then it was back to my head cam footage, again. It showed the boat coming into view and then a splash and floating on the surface, with the lens pointed at sky, after I threw off my goggles. Which compelled me even more not to endanger myself, or others, so thoughtlessly, anymore. Not when my shark friend had—at the very least—had to endanger his own life to protect mine.

Seeing those moments unfold all over, again, was the moment the strange spell was broken.

Or had the prayers of my friends literally reached out and dragged me back from the clutches of self destruction? After that day, I had felt what our youth pastor back in Perisher had described as “convicted”

every time I was even tempted to venture out that far or that deep, again. In fact, I hadn't had any real peace about it until I decided to set up the lagoon as a safely enclosed, underwater laboratory.

Until I decided to do right.

Now it seemed as if I hadn't felt this much peace and security in...I don't know when. Maybe never in my life before. And the amazing thing was I didn't have to give up my dream to do it. I just had to make the decision to do it in a better, safer way. Come to think of it, I hadn't had any panic attacks since then, either. Could it be that I had been fooled into a false sense of security and my own sense of self-preservation had been dulled to practically nothing? That's how things were headed until the Lord sent Grace and Gideon to intervene. I had never had friends like that before. In fact, I never even knew they existed until now.

Which is why I vowed, right then and there, I would never let myself be caught off-guard like that, again. From now on, I was going to be more like Gideon and Grace, and pray each time before I set foot into dangerous places. After that, I would look around. Because no matter what kind of situation a person can get themselves into—intentional or otherwise—the Lord is ready and willing to show them a better way to do things. I just needed a little more practice listening to Him.

“Well...” Grace's voice breaks into my thoughts as the music rises and then fades into the end. “If that doesn't put forth a really compelling case for your shark theory, I don't know what will. What sort of platform were you thinking of introducing the video in?”

“I haven't really thought about that part, yet,” I replied honestly. “But I definitely know the location.”

Grace watched for a few seconds, waiting for me to go on, while Gideon sat down onto an old brown couch and reached for a handful of potato chips.

“Somewhere under the nose of one of those famous shark-catching companies,” I finally finished. “It's called, Dazza Down Under.”

“Oh, no!” Now, it was Grace's turn to jump to her feet. “Your mean Headless in Hacking? They won't even let the Greenpeace people within twenty miles of them. The minute they find out you're staging a protest, they'll kick you out of the place.”

“But everybody has a right to express their own opinion. Correct?” I asked.

“Not really,” Gideon answered. “And definitely not kids our age. But I think I might have an idea how you could get around that.”

“How?” Grace and I both said the word at the same time.

“Come up with a prize, and have people fill out a survey to win a chance at it.”

“Gideon, that's brilliant!” Grace was suddenly all enthusiasm, again. “And while people are filling them out, you can have the video playing close by.”

“But before you even get to that point,” he says, “before you set anything up, in fact—I call and tip off the local newspaper that you're going to be down there at a certain time, showing a piece of such amazing proof that people will be talking about it within twenty-four hours. Because nothing like this has ever been caught on film before.”

“Wow.” I almost had to pinch myself to make sure this was all happening.

“That's fantastic!” Grace's excitement was starting to get catching. “And if we do it during the vacation weeks there will be tons of people there. We could even sell copies of the video and give a portion of the proceeds to some save the sharks foundation, or something. That way, you wouldn't be so much trying to get people to follow you personally, as much as joining with others so everyone can work together on this thing.”

“Yeah, you'd be a live demonstration of how to get involved right off the bat,” Gideon said.

“And you two would be willing to come and help me?”

“Of course,” Grace answered. “We're all in this together, aren't we? Me with my endangered reef information and Gideon with his award-winning videos

about it all. We can book ourselves as the generation that's actually going to do something about the world's problems instead of just holler and protest about them all the time.”

“Uh-oh.” Gideon suddenly set his glass down with a worried look on his face. “There's only one problem. I have a wrestling tournament I'll still be traveling back from on the first couple days of vacation, and Grace has some appointments in Sydney her folks have arranged.”

“Oh, that's right,” She sat down next to him and thought for a minute. “It's also going to take a few extra days to finish the final edits and get enough copies of Shark Girl packaged up to sell, too.”

“Which means Joanie would be left all on her own to do the preliminaries.”

“What preliminaries?” I asked.

“The scary stuff,” he replied.

15

An hour before we have to leave, Mom and I place our gear by the front door, ready to load as soon as the Williams family gets here. I'm taking one sports bag, and I plan on changing into my army uniform at the last minute. Mom sets her sports bag on the floor beside mine, and by that time I'm worried she might overload the van with all this junk.

“Well dear, that's all my personal stuff. I'll bring out my suitcase now.”

Oh, no! Exactly how much is she planning to take? But I don't dare complain in case she refuses to come. So next she lugs out a jumbo size case, which she places beside her sports bag. I groan, but stay zipped, except for smiling big when I ask, “That the lot?”

“Yes, and I need all of it, in case we stay over a few nights.” Then she hurries back to her bedroom, to fetch a cardboard box about the size of a microwave oven.

“What's in there?” I'm almost afraid to ask.

“Always prepare for the unexpected, Joanie,” she quotes.

I hear a car pulling up and my heart starts thumping. Minutes later, we've loaded all Mom's bags, and I'm climbing into the back seat beside Riley and Ding, when I remember. “Hey! Wait up, please. I forgot something special I want to wear.”

So that's how come I have a captive audience waiting when I emerge from the house, again, this time wearing my army camouflage uniform. I had even found a black beret among the clothes in the attic to go along with it. So, putting on the most determined look I can muster, I march back to the van, transformed into my modern interpretation of Joan of Arc. Well, in my mind, anyway.

That is until I glance across to Riley, and catch a twinkle in his eyes like he's up to something. He suddenly pulls a hunting knife out of his backpack and says, “I reckon we both have some different identities to try out this week.” then grins at Mom and me.

Riley and I are always in tune with each other, so, to see him show off by running one finger across the blade of that knife, only makes me laugh. I happen to know it's so blunt, that if you fell on it, you'd only bruise yourself. I love his humor.

“I hope nobody minds that I invited Ding along.” He stashes the knife into his backpack, again.

“Of course not.” Mom answers him. “Ding is a good

dog. But why do you need that large knife?"

"To impress Dazza when we drop by his office, Mrs. T."

Then Riley flashes me a knowing look and whispers, "Among other things."

Then I remember how it was this Dazza guy who sent the diary that got us both working on the mysteries together in the first place. The thing that catapulted us into our secret search: the closed book that must be opened. It has forged us into a great team and taken us to a place where we have faced life and death together. That's how the closeness between us began. A bond you can't get any other way. Riley and I have a mission to finish. Together.

"Okay everyone," his Dad broke into my thoughts "We're off to see the best of what Shark Heads has to offer, and maybe find the Williams family a new home."

Next thing I know we're headed down the drive, all talking at once.

"That's an unusual outfit Joanie, dear." Mom moves her overstuffed purse a bit farther under her feet to settle in. "Is it the latest fashion?"

Latest fashion? Hardly. But at least she's not dropping off to sleep right away, so I jump at the opening. "Not fashion. This is the closest uniform I could find for my Joan Of Arc assignment, Mom. Full suits of armor are sort of hard to come by. So, I had to

improvise.”

“In my opinion, Joan Of Arc was about the bravest teenage girl who ever lived. She actually helped bring King Charles V11 to the throne during the 'Hundred's Years War.”

Ashlee turns sideways to look over the seat at me. “So you're in character for your assignment then, Joanie?”

I nod.

“Okay, but she had a reason for putting on all that armor—she was going to war. She had a mission. What's yours gonna' be?” Trust Riley to ask difficult questions.

“My platform?” Well, here it is. The moment of truth. If I can't explain to my own closest friends and family about the mission I feel so passionate about, I certainly won't be able to get it across to anyone else. “Joan Of Arc went to war because she was compelled to stand up for what was right. To encourage people who weren't strong enough to fight for themselves. She made such an example of herself, that people woke up. So, I thought I'd try doing the something like that.”

Total silence for a few moments and I knew they were all trying to make the connection.

Well, it was now, or never. So, I jumped in and gave it to them. “Does anyone realize if we continue to annihilate the shark population the way we've been doing, they'll not only be extinct before we know it, but

we'll be putting a huge crack in the ocean's ecosystem? That will have a disastrous effect on our entire planet! And we can't wait until it happens before doing something about it because by then it will be too late. There has to be a better way for us all to live together, right now. And I'm going to find it!"

"How exactly are you going to do that, dear?" Mom asks, and I detect slight concern in her voice.

So, I decide that's enough truth bombs for a while. "Through research, Mom. The same way Dad solves his problems. Two for one, you might say in my science and history projects. I only have to change perspectives to fulfill both assignments."

"Whose perspective are you going to take for the sharks?" Riley teases.

"The shark's, of course," I flash him a serious look with my answer.

"Next thing you'll tell us you're gonna' try thinking like a shark." He laughs out loud, like he could just picture me trying to wiggle into a sharkskin or something.

"Something like that." Now I'm trying hard not to laugh, too. Riley has that effect on me.

"Well, I think it's brilliant." Ashlee turns around to face the front, again. "You've got an amazing brain, Joanie Thomas."

"Just like her dad," says Riley.

“And poor little normal me having to cope with two of them!” Mom adds, and we all crack up.

We're on the freeway now, heading north.

“What’s everybody feel like?” Mr. Williams asks. “Fast food now and a nice meal later on, or nice meal now, and something light after we drop Ding off at the kennels?”

By this time, we’re all in vacation-mode. Even Ding, who keeps sticking his head over the seat now and then to give me a nuzzle since we haven't seen each other in so long. Everything is fun. The rest stops give us a chance to admire some of the spectacular scenery as we pass through the rain forest. Plus some long relaxing silences to think, and totally chill.

“How are you going to think like a shark when they don’t think at all?” Riley asked suddenly. Uh-oh. He was wearing one of those teasing looks I've come to dread because he usually gets the upper hand whenever we debate. And it looks to me as though he's ready to stir the pot, right now.

“What do you mean?” Always answer a question with a question, if you're stalling.

“You don't get it Jo. They don’t think, they just react. That’s what most people believe.”

“It may be hard for you understand, but they do think, Rye—especially the Bulls. They have some of the highest reasoning capabilities of all sharks. I’ve been

doing huge amounts of research on that for my project.”

“I bet I’m gonna’ know just about everything there is to know about them after working for Dazza Down Under. They’ve been hunting sharks for decades.”

“You can learn more by watching how things live, rather than by how they die.” I had forgotten for a minute that his intended summer job would officially put him on the extermination end of the shark problem. In direct opposition to me.

“Don’t worry,” he says, like he’s read my mind. “Just think of it more like having someone working for you undercover. I’ll be your inside man on the job.”

Which reminds me why I am so crazy about Riley Williams. He takes friendship to the extreme and will stand by you, no matter what happens. “You’re the best, Rye.”

“Ya’ reckon?” He gives me a wink that makes me feel warm all over.

“Joanie, dear?” Mom raises her head off the jacket she had bunched against the window to sleep against. “You’re not going to try to put one of those—those radio things onto a dangerous shark, are you? Because I don’t think your father would approve of that.”

“Not all by myself, Mom. Only when I have lots of professional supervision. So don’t worry. I might have Dad’s enthusiasm but I’ve got your common sense.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She leans her head against the

jacket, again. “Teachers should be careful handing out these kinds of field assignments. It’s so easy for young people to get carried away.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. T,” Riley says. “Dad’s always told me you need to get carried away sometimes when you believe in something enough. Right, Dad?”

“Absolutely,” he answers.

Ashlee turns up her favorite love song that suddenly pops up on the “oldies but goodies” radio station they had been listening to which was mostly all love songs.

“Not that one, again,” Riley moans.

She turned her blonde head to throw a teasing backward glance in his direction. “Wait till it happens to you, young fella.”

“Hey—Ash--not in front of company!” he complains, playing along with his pretty new stepmom.

Which sets us all off, again. Even Mom.

”Seriously, though,” says Ashlee, “I do have to mention that you seem awfully young to be working for somebody like this Dazza character.”

“Not until he graduates,” Mr. Williams explains. “And it’s a well-respected company. I looked into it before I gave Riles permission. It’ll be good experience for him.”

“Yeah, he operates boats that go all over Australia, laying safety nets off the beaches to protect surfers. They also catch and cull sharks if there’s been too many

attacks, and the Government has put the word out. Hey! If I'm okay at shark catching, I might even start my own dive company. Got a name all picked out. The Great Australian Bite. Everyone cool with it?"

Well I'm certainly not cool with it, I think to myself. Not with marine biology being my special subject at school. And especially not when I'm hoping that my shark presentation may help secure me a place at Uni, or even my whole future direction in life. Now, I'm wondering if Riley is only making smart chat, or if he seriously is thinking of becoming a professional shark catcher. Surely he can't think that participating in the killing of so many innocent sea creatures is okay just because a few swimmers have chosen to venture into their territory.

Then I wonder if he was only joking when he said he'd be my inside man.

"Are we staying at that motel I told you about, Dad? Riley leans forward a bit to talk. "The one with the restaurant next door that has a deck right on the waterfront? We can see all kinds of fish swimming around while we eat. I checked it out online. Looks awesome."

"I've made a reservation there, Riles. We should all enjoy it. Does Dazza know you're coming?"

"No. I want to check on his catches. See how many, and how big they are. Only one way to find out if he is

really as good as his advertising, and that's to surprise the dude."

Catches? I guarantee Riley will not want to slaughter them off the planet, once he sees them up close. And me in the water with them after he sees the video. If that could plant some sympathy seeds in even one shark catcher, I'd consider it a huge success. Have to admit I'm having a hard time keeping the surprise to myself, though. But I want him to get the full effect, like everyone else that watches it. Then I wonder if I could talk the other adults into being somewhere else at that time, since any parental interference during my first media interview could seriously hamper my future.

I look over at Mom, but she's asleep, again. Which gives me the idea that the best time for my demonstrations on shark conservation would be in the early mornings, since she never gets up early these days. That's when most serious fishermen go out, anyway.

On the other hand, Riley wouldn't be so easy to evade.

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Several hours later, we pull up at the motel near the Dazza Down Under company, and Riley jumps out and heads into their office. Well, he's not leaving me behind, so I crawl over the top of Mom (who is asleep, again) to charge into the office after him. That's where I get an awful shock. Horrible posters on every wall seem to leap out and whack me in the face.

Fishermen posing with dead sharks, giant stingrays, and huge gropers. It's disgusting. What tough guys they must think they are, wearing smug expressions – and standing beside the sea creatures they murdered. My cheeks fire up, as Riley blathers away to the guy behind the desk, who reaches under the counter to grab some brochures. These he shoves across to Riley. And me? I feel like I'm on another planet, recoiling at the very thought of Rye joining in such a horrible thing.

If I couldn't change his mind, he might spend the rest of his life doing this kind of stuff. Not to mention that

being on such opposite ends of the planet in our thinking could seriously damage our relationship at some point. We needed to talk about this stuff. But this wasn't the best time, and I knew it. Which is why I could have earned a prize for following Rye back to the car minus a stern lecture from me on cruelty to sea animals.

With super-human effort, I manage to shut my trap and let him rave on about how many--how big--and how huge his catch is going be once he starts working with Dazza. Not while there's breath left in this fire-breathing soldier, I think to myself. I'm gutted. Has Riley forgotten Geology so fast? He used to say it was the only career he wanted.

A little while later, I'm shaking Mom's shoulder. "We're at the motel, Mom." I shake her again, a little harder this time. "Good thing you packed your extra stuff because Riley's Dad has booked us into this cool motel right on the bar where the fishing boats go out."

By now I'm beginning to feel awfully hot and sweaty in my army camouflage uniform. I have other clothes with me but I'll be disappointed in myself if I can't stay in character for even one day without caving. Not only does wearing my uniform help me to feel the same kind of power I imagine Joan felt every time she mounted her horse to fight for right, and save the persecuted. It's also an important part of the "preliminaries" I'm supposed to be doing before Gideon and Grace get here in a couple

days.

“From now on I intend to become known as Joan of Shark.” I inform everyone, as we unpack the car.

“Okay, shark girl!” Riley teases. “Take a squiz at that!”

Everyone follows his gaze to the outside wall of the fish shop two doors down from our motel. Plastered there is one of Dazza's obscene posters. “*Dazza Down Under! Catch a Big-UN with Us!*”

“No wonder you wanted to stay here,” I accuse. “I should have guessed.”

“Why not? It's awesome, here. Rain forests, giant trees, hills and trails for hiking, top fishing, and best of all we're close to the boats crossing the bar and into the ocean. Even a 'shark girl' has to go on vacation sometimes.” Then he snakes his hand around in a weaving motion, in and out like a shark swimming—at the same time humming that awful tune from a scary shark movie.

I treat him to my best stink-eye glare.

He thinks I'm teasing, as usual, but inside I'm disturbed right down to my toes. Something that doesn't get past Ding, though. After what we've been through together he's so in tune with me I think he would tell all my secrets if only he could get a few words out. Now, he just whines a bit and nudges up against my hand until I give him a few scratches behind the ears to let him know

I'm okay. For now, anyway.

Mom has walked ahead to our room, and I start to follow her when Mr. Williams calls out. "How about we all meet up in the morning for breakfast at the cafe overlooking the harbor?"

Suddenly I look at Mom and forget about sharks. All this social mixing has to be good for her, and it can't come soon enough. Because lately I never know what mood she will be in. Silent and withdrawn in the morning, or talking away to me like her old self in the afternoon.

She touches my arm as we set our suitcases in our room and look around. It's nice, decorated in ocean colors with abstract paintings of starfish and sea horses on the wall. There are two big beds, a coffee maker, and a TV set. They probably even have room service from the restaurant. I'm starting to feel excited about this vacation.

"I think I'll rest awhile, Joanie." she says after a minute. "I'm worn out from the drive."

"Okay." I agree, but what I'm really thinking is, more sleep, Mom? What you need is more time awake.

Riley has gone to take Ding for a run before dropping him off at the kennel. No dogs allowed in the hotel rooms. But it's still a while before dark and I'm feeling restless. So, I wander down to the jetty to see if I can catch a glimpse of any sea life. I look down to discover

I must have been so zeroed in on Mom, I forgot to change out of my army uniform. The ocean has become my favorite place to be now, and it never fails to draw me. So, I sit on the edge of the jetty for a while, watching the waves rush back out to wherever their eternal journey began.

I dangle my legs over the end, as close as I can get to the deep, blue water below. Peering into its depths, my thoughts drift to Mom and I can't help wondering—for the hundredth time-- how come all she wants to do in this amazing place, is sleep? Is she sick, or something?

Totally lost in thoughts of what I would do without her, I notice a large shape swim by smoothly along the jetty, then come back, again. Was that a Great White? Or could it possibly have been a Bull shark? My Bull shark? I have no idea. All I can see is the magnificent tail it uses to propel itself gracefully through the water with, using merely the slightest of movements.

Sharks all look a little similar to me, and there's still so much I have to learn about them. Could any of my sharks have traveled this far? Exactly where, and how far can they swim in one day? These are some of the questions I'm impatient to have answered.

The shark swims away, then turns around, again, to glide smoothly back toward where I sit. This time I can see it's face, those gray eyes totally fixated on me. I swear it's as though this particular shark has tuned itself

into my mind. That's when the unbelievable happens. For a fleeting second I spot a torn place from his fin. Could this actually be my shark?

"I'm sad you lost part of your fin, my friend," I tell him, in case it is. "But I'm happy too, because it means that wherever you go, I can recognize you." Then, just as suddenly, the Bull shark vanishes.

There's lots of other lovely sea-life to distract me, though. A variety of fish, some a really decent size, plus smaller, colorful ones. There's a family of cute little sea horses in a straight row, and a big old turtle. I'm so excited I hardly dare breathe as these ocean beauties parade themselves before me. At that moment I'm sure the study of ocean creatures and their homes will definitely be my future, and vow to become their champion for as long as it takes.

Not only that, but I will try to defend them as bravely as Joan of Arc defended her people. An image of her pretty face flashes before me. Features so fine and delicate. Thank goodness her injuries hadn't scarred her face. In fact, history says that the two times she was wounded, she hauled herself back up on her horse, and rode right back into the thick of battle.

I stand to stretch sleepily, squinting against the flickering rays of the setting sun. Then it hits me that boats probably go out at night, too. How awful to think that, even then, my friends still have no escape from their

cruel torturers. I'm standing near the channel which cuts through a bar. So right here must be where they'll return with their helpless victims. I feel sick to think that every one of those people may not be one scrap upset that most of those beautiful sea creatures they have brought aboard are either suffering, or dead.

Suddenly I'm glad we are staying at this motel, because I realize it couldn't be a more perfect place to stage my series of demonstrations. Maybe even help Riley to see that he doesn't really want to kill off our amazing sea life like those big companies do. Which reminds me I should see if I can get hold of one of the schedules from Dazza's place so I will know exactly what time the boats will be coming and going. Which I find on a stand of free brochures in a corner of the motel lobby.

Before I head back to our room to crash, I pause one more time to look back at the view and admire how majestic the ocean looks. I zero in on the farthestmost wave coming in, enjoying the way it waits until the precise moment to curl over, before beginning its race to the shore.

I think I actually stop breathing for a few seconds when it occurs to me how many sharks, fish, stingrays or their peers might be riding that wave towards me at this very moment. They don't know it but these beautiful, unique creatures are heading right into a trap!

It's impossible to put what I'm feeling into words. All I know is that the "Maid of Shark Cove" will try to save as many fish-souls as she possibly can during the next few days. And all she needs to accomplish that goal, is her banner of mercy and love, plus enough courage and determination to do what needs to be done.

I get it now. Oh, I so get it.

17

It's five-thirty in the morning. I'm awake, but Mom is still sleeping. As quietly as possible I take the banner I made so carefully before I came that would launch "Day One" of my shark campaign, and head for the jetty. It's really more of a sign but in my heart it's a banner. Of course, I'm dressed in full uniform, too, in the hope of catching the eye of Dazza customers. Or any other fishermen who might have chosen today for their excursions. At the moment, though, it's still pretty dark and I have plenty of time to take up my position down on the wharf.

How magic this little town looks, bathed in that special pre-dawn glow many seaside villages seem to enjoy. I even like the way the area smells. Like a fish factory—fresh and clean. I'm here just in time to see stars disappearing to wherever stars go to during the day. After which, golden flashes of famous Aussie sunshine stab their way forth determinedly through what lingers of the dark night. Awesome—uniquely Australian—a

mysteriously ethereal show of nature. But not yet.

On the walk toward the boat ramp that leads down to the wharf, only a few streaks of sunlight lurk teasingly behind the night sky, faithfully announcing the impending arrival of the big show, when everything explodes into sunshine. Even though it's early, I see people walking about on the fishermen's rocks, a short distance up the beach from where the boats dock.

Hope they don't get washed out to sea. And this area better not be where Mom intends to walk, either. She isn't too steady on her feet these days and rocks get slippery with waves splashing onto them every few minutes. The ocean is rough as I catch sight of a few departing boats, rocking and lurching badly, as they chug their way towards their daily slaughter of my friends. Even nature doesn't seem to be cooperating with them today. And it was at that exact moment I began to fall in love with the primitive wilderness of Shark Heads.

What I'm really waiting for is the return of the night fishing boats. The ones who will be occupied with cleaning, weighing, and taking photographs of their catches right here on the docks. They will be my first captive audience. I take a few deep breaths head down to the docks. Right about the time I was feeling more alone than I was comfortable with, Riley turned up, wearing this big grin and a traditional Aussie Akubra hat, which

makes him look like a National Park Ranger.

“G’day, Shark girl.”

“Hi. Want to come with me? I’m heading for where I figure I’ll be most visible to the fishermen. Right where most of the boats come and go.” I shift my big, rolled up banner to my other side so we can walk closer together.

“Oh, you’ll be visible in that outfit. No worries. What’s the sign say?”

“I’ll show you when I open it up,” I tease. “So, you can get the full effect.”

“Always making me wait for something.” He gives a fake moan, then flashes a good-natured grin while he gently takes the sign from under my arm. “Got it for you. Hang onto me—it’s slippery out here.”

I never have to be asked twice to hang on to Riley Williams. As tall and lanky as he is, he’s strong and agile. Perfectly at home on just about any terrain nature can throw at him. Which I reckon he gets from being raised by a family of rock climbers and sled-dog racers. I always get an immediate sense of safety when he’s around.

“Where’s Ding?”

“Kennels aren’t open this early. Anyway, he doesn’t really like hanging out in crowds. Thought I’d find a stretch of empty beach after breakfast and let him run around.”

There are a couple of small groups waiting to board

fishing boats that we pass by. It's still too dark to see much more than shadows and only a few are talking quietly in the early hour. We wander the rest of the way in companionable silence, then pick a nice spot to sit down on the very end of the pier, allowing our legs to dangle over the water as we look down. I hear the click of a switch and see the beam of a torch Riley has unhooked from his belt and pointed down into the sea. The beam shoots right through the surface and illuminates a long shaft of clarity which reveals an entire world of sea life going on beneath us.

“Rye, that's amazing!” I grab his arm and point when I see a shadow pass by. “Look, a shark!”

“Yeah. Hammerhead. Easy to recognize those babies.” He swings the beam in a wide arc in front of us. “Wow! Look over there—sharks everywhere. A whole bunch of them!”

“I've never seen so many in one place before. It's like they're putting on a parade for us.”

“More likely because of all the fish that gets unloaded around here. Waiting for table scraps. They're scavengers, you know? They'll eat anything.”

“Well, not exactly anything. But they do have an important purpose in the ecosystem. Everything does, or God wouldn't put them here. Wouldn't you agree?”

“Well, not exactly anything.” I can feel myself getting a twinge defensive. “But I agree they have an

important purpose in the ecosystem. Everything does, or God wouldn't put them here. Right?"

"I guess so. Never thought about it that way."

"I do. I think about it a lot. Where did you learn this trick? It's better than looking through a diving mask. Takes in a wider scope. Are you sure you've never been here before?"

"I learned it from listening to old Arthur's stories. He used to come here to work every season with Daza. In his younger days mostly. Anyway, they used it for night fishing to see what was cruising around down there. He said you could even see squid trying to steal the bait off their hooks. Made him laugh when he remembered. That old cackling laugh of his."

The beam stopped moving for a few seconds as he drifted into the memory.

"You think he's dead, Rye?"

"Dunno. Could be just hiding out somewhere. Don't worry about it, though." He put a reassuring arm around me and that same sense of safety washed over me, again. "Now that we know the truth he isn't going to show his face around here. Let's watch the sunrise."

He snapped off the light and put the torch back on his belt. "As soon as enough sun shines over the water you won't be able to see that way, anymore. Too much reflection on the surface. Here it comes, see?"

A pinpoint of brilliance appeared on the horizon and

we watched, in awe, as it seemed to be literally rising up out of the sea. Another fishing boat chugged past us, headed out, and I realized I was missing an opportunity to communicate both ways. My plan had been to put myself directly in front of the returning night fishing customers so they could read my sign as the boats came in. I was sure they would be coming back in these early hours of the morning.

And I'm not disappointed when I notice a couple on their way in, right now.

I grab my banner and lug it over to a couple of empty slips beneath a Dazza Down Under sign. It had an exaggerated painting of a fishing pole with a huge, jaw-snapping shark on the end that took up half the sign. Under that in smaller letters it said, "Take home a head from Shark Heads."

"Well, it's now or never," I announce. I stand next to the sign and start to unroll my own while Riley stands back to get the full effect.

The sign is a blown up underwater scene that I designed on computer and had printed out in the school art department. It had a sea turtle swimming in one corner and a seal in the other. Between them was a little school of brilliant sun fish. In the center—and stretching across the entire length of the sign—was a huge Bull Shark passing peacefully above them, and the shadows of others farther in the distance behind. At the top, where

the azure blue faded into white, were black letters outlined in gold that read: Shark Girl says, “The ocean is our home. Please don't destroy it. Let's Talk!” Under that is my own phone number, which Riley recognizes immediately.

For a moment he's stunned and doesn't say a word. I bow my head and say a quick prayer that I'm doing the right thing, and for strength to put myself aside enough to care more about these endangered creatures than my own embarrassment at making a spectacle. Even if my best friend disapproves. At least long enough to make some kind of an impact. I may not be able to raise a whole army, but I can at least—

All of a sudden I hear motors and realize the boats are pulling in.

No time to worry about what anyone thinks, anymore. I'm too busy marching between the boats, doing my best at making a sharp military turn at both ends, and waving my sign in an arc as high as I can reach before starting over. Back and forth so people have to wait until I pass in order to drag their poor, helpless victims over to the photograph area beneath the Dazza Down Under sign.

I stay quiet and serious—like I'm leading a funeral procession—and try not to look directly at the few sharks that aren't yet dead taking their last, final gasps. Struggling weakly as they desperately try to push some

precious ocean through their gills. But there is none. And as they breathe their last, I feel their distress in my own heart and can hardly bear it.

I suddenly can't stand by and watch, anymore, and am dangerously close to bursting into tears.

About the time I'm rolling up my sign, thinking the whole experiment is a failure, one of the men and two women come over to talk to me. But by that time I'm too gutted to answer and can only take one of the cards out of my pocket that I had printed up for the occasion, and hand it over. On the back are some of the true statistics about sharks that few people know but are truly amazing. On the front is a copy of my sign and information. One woman's eyes fill with tears when she sees them rolling down my cheeks, and the man pats me on the shoulder as they walk away.

No one else speaks to me or even gives a glance in my direction as they pass. I'm fumbling to get the velcro dots on the back edges of my sign lined up to hold it together and can't even think what to do next, when I feel a familiar arm around my shoulders.

"Let's go have breakfast, Shark Girl. Your Mom will be wondering where you are."

"Thanks." I let him take the sign as we start walking while I dig a tissue out of one of my pockets and blow my nose. "Changing people's minds is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Not even one person got the

message!”

“I wouldn't say that. When I saw you standing there in that uniform with your head bowed over the sign...”

He paused for so long a wave of dread swept over me at the thought he might think I was crazy. Or—at the very least—I had embarrassed him. I looked up to see which one. Only to find him staring intently at me with a look I had never seen before. “I—I'm really sorry if I—”

“Don't be sorry. You're right, Jo. We can't just keep destroying anything we feel like in this world. Especially the stuff we can't live without. I was thinking about what you said. About God having a purpose for them, too. They're part of the cycle. And if we break the cycle, we break us.”

“Oh, Rye!” A flood of relief washed over me that was almost too good to be true.

“Seriously. Did you see how many sharks just those two boats brought in?”

“I couldn't. I had to just keep marching and staring straight ahead because my heart was breaking! They were dying right in front of us and nobody cared!”

“I care. I do now, anyway.”

“Riley Williams—that's totally amazing!” I practically knocked him over with a hug.

“You're what's amazing,” he insisted. “And anybody that doesn't agree is gonna' have me to deal with!”

Which was enough to right anything and everything in my world that was wrong at the moment. The stab of rejection from the fishermen didn't even sting so much. The sun was glorious as we came up the ramp and I could already see people gathering at the tables under the umbrellas on the long deck outside the restaurant. We were on vacation together and had entire days left to enjoy!

Re-positioning my army beret, we head for my room where we can meet up with Mom and get ready for the next thing on our list for today: a hike to those limestone caves Riley is so excited to explore. Even Mom expressed some interest in those when we were talking about them, yesterday, on the long drive. And I knew—with Riley along—she would have a hard time saying, no, to coming along with us. Except when we got there...

She was nowhere to be found.

18

She did leave a note for me on the table, though. “Gone for a walk. Love, Mom.”

“What's wrong, Jo?” Riley asked. “She's probably out cruising the shops somewhere. Weren't you wanting her to get out and start enjoying life? We still have about twenty minutes before the time everybody decided to meet. She'll probably show up at the restaurant.”

“There's something I haven't told you about, yet, Rye. It's—its—”

“Hey. I was raised with a bunch of busted up bachelors, remember? So, I can probably guess better than you what's up with your mom. But let's not jump to conclusions before we know for sure. Okay? Sometimes people realize they have to make a change all on their own.”

He is right, of course, so I get it together and we walk down to the harbor restaurant to locate seats at a table outdoors. The sun is warm on my arms, already, as I lean

over the deck railing, I'm rewarded by seeing heaps of different fish swim by. It isn't long before I feel happy and relaxed, again.

I'm still hanging over when our order arrives. "Apart from the fishing boats, this is an awesome place, isn't it, Rye?"

But now it's his turn to be distracted. "I wonder where Dad and Ashlee have got to, now? They keep disappearing."

"I guess they want some privacy. After all, they're still sort of on their honeymoon."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Anyway, your Dad can call you."

Riley's head tips to one side—a guilty grin on his dial.

"Don't tell me you don't have your phone with you."

"Forgot, again."

"Could be a message on it. We've been gone a couple of hours." Which makes me wonder why Mom didn't leave one on mine instead of writing a note.

"Maybe she needs some time to herself, Jo." He's reading my mind, again. "She could be gone for hours. They all could. Don't be so quick to assume the worst. Let's just split and do what we want for a while."

So, I decide to accept that Mom is outdoors because she wants to be—which could mean she's finally back in the real world again. Rather than believing the absolute

worst all the time. “Okay. But if you're wrong and she really is in trouble, I'll substitute skim for the real stuff in your milkshakes from now on.”

He flashes me a look of horror and we both crack up. Riley knows when to help me switch back to real time, and exactly how to do it.

Half an hour later, we're headed out. No sign of Mom—or anyone else. So we stopped into the motel office to get a couple of tourist maps, only to discover another disappointment. No dogs allowed in the the rain forest parks. Ding would have to stay in the kennels for this outing.

“We have those rules in Perisher, too,” he admitted after we spent an extra hour on a nearby beach, throwing a Frizbee and running Ding around before we really got going. By that time, everything was getting close to uncomfortable on the heat factor.

The sand was clean and gorgeous, but hot. So was our walk around the base of the cliffs, where the tide had come up so far we had to step onto submerged rocks to get all the way around. Only mid-morning and I'm perspiring like a pig in a bacon factory. There's still a hint of a breeze off the ocean and that—and a lot of water from our backpacks—is the only thing that keeps us going.

“Should be cooler once we hit the rainforest,” Riley encourages me. “Wait till you get inside those caves,

though. You'll think you're in the arctic. We better go single file, here. Keep close behind me. According to the map, this path narrows to a winding track around the top of the cliff-face and I don't want any accidents. Especially when I've got my girl along."

Soon we're both soaking wet and breathing hard. The climb around the cliffs is heavy-going and we don't have any spare breath for chatter. We stop for a breather and Riley takes his hat off long enough to run a hand through his damp hair and put it on, again. "Man, you're gonna get heat stroke without the right hat, Jo. I sure hope you used plenty of sunblock. Here..."

He slips out of his backpack and rustles around until he comes up with another Akubra. Not a genuine Akubra, but one of those breathable high-tech designs you can roll up and stash anywhere.

For comfort, nothing else comes close to the original Akubras. They've been making them from genuine Aussie rabbit fur for over a hundred years. And I don't care about my Joan of Arc hairstyle at the moment. My own hair is so damp it's reversed itself to my own natural curl automatically.

"Better drink some water." He hands over a bottle of water and fishes out another for himself before unfolding the map, again.

"From here we head downhill. I'm following the black line that goes straight to the caves instead of taking

any of the longer trails. Might miss some of the scenery but we started too late to fool around.” He looks up long enough to wink at me and I can’t help smiling because I love it when he does that.

“Sounds easy enough but....” I flop down on a patch of grass at the edge of the trail. “Give me another minute. Don’t forget I have to take two steps to your one.”

He laughs, and sits down next to me. “Maybe the tide will be turned and we can take the beach route back. Might be risky on the rocks, though. We’ll have to check and make sure.” All of a sudden his phone rings and he reaches into his pocket to answer it.

From his frown, I suspect it's not his dad.

“It's EG.” he whispers, placing his hand briefly over the phone to tell me. “Yes. I can hear you. Faxed to our motel? Neat. How many more pages?”

A long pause while he listens some more, “Okay, gotcha'. We're out hiking, now, but we'll check them out as soon as we can. Did you come across anything else about Ted?”

At the mention of Ted's name, I feel a flutter of apprehension. Listening to Riley's end of the conversation, It sounded like EG had something important to share. Why else would she be interrupting his vacation?

“Well, I guess that proves it.” He returns the phone to his pocket with a heavy sigh.

“What!” I bounce up like an umbrella let loose.
“Does she know where Ted is?”

“No, nothing like that.” He stuck his empty bottle back into his pack with a resigned sigh. “It proves if any member of our immediate families wanted to call us today, they could have.”

“My shoes are soaked through, already,” I whine. “I guess I should have worn my other ones.”

“Bummer!” He sounds disappointed. “I was going to take a few samples from the rain forest to compare with the ones I get from on the beach and in the caves. I need all three types for my project. But you really shouldn't go that far, today.”

“I can go farther. I don't even have any blisters, yet. We're over halfway there, right?”

“Yeah, but you still have to hike back, again. Getting blisters the first day out could take the fun out of all our hikes. The caves are the toughest trail in this park and I don't think many people spend too much time there before heading back. Almost impossible to travel through rain forest in the dark.”

“Seems like a lot people would like to camp out in a place as beautiful as this.”

“They're not the greatest place to camp in. Thing about wilderness places is they're wild. All sorts of wild things on the move at night. Eastern Browns, Death Adders, and funnel web spiders. Things don't have to be

big to be deadly around here.”

“How about if you went ahead to get your specimens and I wait for you here, then?”

“No way. Things move out of your way when you're moving and making noise. But the minute you sit still and get quiet, all sorts of stuff moves in. So, we better get ready to tackle the rocks, again.”

“Rye, I live at the beach. Remember? I walk on slippery rocks every day—especially around the lagoon. You go ahead and get some specimens while I start back. If you don't catch up with me we can just meet back at the motel. And I can pick up those extra pages EG faxed over, too.”

He sighs. “Okay. But I sure don't feel comfortable with you going all that way on your own, Jo.”

I give him a friendly shove. “I got this, Rye, honest. Now quit stressing over me, and get going. Or it'll be me having to come back and rescue you.”

“That'll be the day. But if I do ever have to be rescued I couldn't ask for anyone braver than Shark Girl to come after me. Not even a Great White could scare her.”

Oh, it scared me, all right. But I didn't think now was the time to confess that. So, I just smiled and gave him a wave before I took off. Half an hour later, I'm picking my way over the rocks—confident but cautious. I can see why rock-fishing is so popular. The rocks extend a long way out into the ocean and there are some pretty big

fish swimming around that far out. Not to mention the rush they must feel over the danger involved. Some people live for that kind of stuff, I reckon.

Maybe I was tampering with some of that, myself, swimming out farther and deeper into our cove every day and hardly noticing it. Then a strange thought occurs to me. I start to wonder if the swimming with sharks I've done recently, could somehow insulate me from an attack if I were to fall in, right now. And I wondered if my Bull Shark could sense me enough in the area to come to my rescue, again, if he had to. Could he sense if I was stressed or in danger?

"Wait a minute, Joanie Thomas," I say out loud to myself. "It was the Lord who saved you out there. He might have used the Bull Shark to answer your prayer but He answered as soon as you hollered for help. This is different." And I knew—almost as if a light had come on—exactly what the difference was.

What happened back at the cove was a mistake I made out of my own ignorance. But I knew better, now. I knew that jumping into the water just to see if the Lord would do it, again, would be an act of disobedience on my part. Especially after I had already resolved to do things smarter and safer from now on. Which is why I didn't venture any farther out onto those rocks than I had to. It was too tempting. And it was a temptation I was not going to take.

Instead, I decided to go on.

And that was the only reason I climbed down off the other side at exactly the right moment to see a figure on the beach. A lady. Who looked like she was heading into the water. Did she know what she was doing? This was not a swimming area, it was a gathering place for things on the prowl for food. It wasn't until I got closer that I realized she was wearing a dress.

A lovely, flower print dress.

They say your blood can run cold in a situation of utter desperation, and that's what I feel. My blood runs cold, and I scream. Then run toward her as fast as I can. Because that's not just any woman walking into the ocean, fully dressed, out there.

It is my own mother.

“Mom! Stop! Please stop!” I scream. But she's too far away to hear me. I'm skidding and sliding down on slippery rocks, barely able to stay upright, thankful for the protection my wet sneakers provide from the razor sharp stones. I keep screaming at the top of my lungs—forced to watch helplessly as she wades deeper and deeper into the ocean.

What is she doing? She knows what's out there!

I fall to my knees once, then pick myself up only to slip again. Then finally, wonderfully, I'm onto the beach sand and running across to the spot where she went in. I sprint as far out as I can, knowing it's quicker than

swimming against the tide.”

“Mom!” I shout as loud as I can but she either hasn't heard me or doesn't want to. She just continues on with that slow, robot-like rhythm she's got going as she steadily pushes herself against the incoming tide. Deeper and deeper.

“Edna May!” I scream her name.

Then what I dread most catches my eye. A shark fin about a hundred yards off the point and headed this way. I hit the water, diving deep to get under the waves. The incoming tide is strong, slowing me down, but I push straight across until I see her legs ahead of me, and that flower print dress swirling around them like seaweed drifting then tugging against current. I splutter to the surface, gasping for air, the second I break water.

I can't see the shark fin anymore but that doesn't mean anything. I've observed enough shark behavior to need only my imagination to see it kicking into lightning speed just below the surface. That's how sharks are. You have no idea they are about to strike. Until they do.

'Headless in Hacking. Headless in Hacking.' Those foolish words keep playing through my mind. Why is she doing this?

“Mom, stop! It's Joanie! For God's sake—wait for me!”

Then she finally turns around to face me.

“Joanie? What are you doing here? Did you decide

to go swimming, too? It's beautiful in the water today, isn't it?" She smiles and turns away again, bobbing up and down to resume that slow, death march into deeper water.

Two more strong strokes and I'm there. I draw her close for a brief second, then immediately start dragging her back toward shore. Don't splash, I warn myself. Whatever happens, do not splash. By this time I'm panting, almost totally out of breath before she tries to pull back.

"Oh, let's not go back yet," she says. "The water is lovely, and I feel so good."

"I'm glad, Mom, but we have to get out here. And right now!" I duck my head under to see how close the shark is...

Close enough to see it's a Bull Shark. Probably not mine but better than most because they rarely attack women. He's not swimming as fast as I had imagined, either. Just cruising. Coming in for a look. We're still about twenty feet to safety.

I break surface, and minutes later, I'm dragging Mom up the beach where we both collapse. Questions can wait until later. Right now, I need to get her away from here and back to the motel. My first impulse is to call my father. Except Dad has a spotless reputation in medical circles and the funding he depends on for his research begins tapping out caution in the echoes of my

mind. Stuff like this—if it's what I think it was—can tarnish reputations enough to narrow opportunities for people. Especial in a field as competitive as his where everyone is clamoring for funds.

Mom chatters the whole way back to the motel. As if nothing unusual had happened at all. She seems perfectly normal, now, but I don't know whether to believe her or not. What I do believe, without a shadow of doubt, is that if I hadn't made the right decision back there on the rocks, I could very likely be without a mother, right now. I could have been playing around with sharks, while she was drowning or getting killed by one out there. What if I hadn't made the right decision?

I'm not totally certain if she is really with it, right now, either. She's still chattering on about nothing important, as if we're walking back from an afternoon of shopping together. Once, she happens to look directly at me and I notice how strange her eyes look. Clouded-over, eyelids half-shut, pupils dilated. Something is still terribly wrong, here.

“Oh, thank goodness we're back,” she says when we finally tumble into our room. “Can I have first shower, dear? I'm soaked through.”

“That's because you went swimming with your clothes on, Mom. Why did you do that?”

I try to stay calm in case the reason she did what she did, is because she's having some kind of emotional

breakdown. Which could be why she's been acting weird and emotionally absent for weeks, now. But I'm not sure what to do about it.

"I didn't pack a bathing suit, dear. And it was so hot today I couldn't resist going for a swim." She's busy fussing around in her suitcase, selecting dry clothes, and chatting away as if nothing in the world is out of order. And why don't I check if there's something good on TV?

Finally, I blurt out the thing that's been sitting the most heavy on my heart for weeks. "Mom, are you okay? I mean really okay? Because that was a very dangerous thing you did. You know this area has one of the heaviest populations of sharks, in the world. And this town is even worse than the rest."

She pauses in the doorway, but only for a moment. "Joanie, you're getting to be a real worry-wart. Just like your father. Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be? I've got everything in the world I could want." After which, she shuffles into the bathroom and closes the door. Discussion over.

But she hasn't fooled me. Because I didn't miss the way she had to struggle to get those last few words out. She has everything in the world she could want? My mother hadn't ever had what she really wanted. To live a normal life like everyone else instead of the odd one she had been forced into ever since she fell in love with Dad. And now that Ted wasn't there to take up some of

the slack—and Dad was being forced to train up some beautiful young assistant for weeks, if not months, on end—it was all becoming too unbearable for her. Now, she wasn't just unhappy, she was desperately unhappy. My mother deliberately went swimming in her beautiful new dress, today, for only one reason.

It was because she never had any intention of coming back.

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I stick close to Mom the entire rest of the day. I even talk her into ordering room service and watching a movie that Riley comes over to share with us. She falls asleep halfway through but not before I've convinced her to come along with us to the Limestone Caverns in the morning. She seems almost entirely back to her normal self, but after the swimming incident, I'm not going to trust those things anymore. Not all the way, at least, and not for a long time.

I'm anxious to talk things over with Dad. But not until he's home where we can have a private chat in his study, and definitely not over the phone. That's because he'd be down here on the next flight out, and causing all sorts of rumors to start circulating around the hospital. The panic was over for now, and—if I stayed on my toes watching out for her—we could get by until I thought up a more typical reason for getting him back before he

originally planned. Short of breaking a bone, or something.

Tomorrow, I was scheduled to hand out shark safety brochures that contained an invitation for our video debut on the wharf the following day. Everyone was interested in how to stay safe from sharks, so, it was a natural conversation starter on both sides of the controversy. Then when Gideon and Grace came in tonight—Grace would be sleeping in with Mom and I, and Gideon staying with Riley—I would feel a lot stronger about meeting the public than when I was all by myself.

The brochures were brilliant. They were another one of Grace's contributions—that girl really has a flare for the artistic. With my shark information, Gideon's photography, and her layout and design talents, we were presenting ourselves as a team of high school students working on an exciting marine science project. Another plus on our side because almost everyone likes to help out on school activities whenever they can. Besides that, Gideon said if you had to bring attention to something negative, you better have at least three positive things to go along with it to balance it out.

Which is why Mom didn't mind in the least helping me with the brochures the hour before we left for our long hike. It was a little tricky making sure she didn't catch sight of the invitations, though. More important, I

didn't want her to see that video for the first time in a public place. Of course, both my parents would have to see it eventually, but by that time I would have my lagoon observation outpost set up and wouldn't be taking unnecessary chances anymore.

Between the Great White incident and having to haul my own mother away from death's door, yesterday, I don't think I would ever be taking those kinds of chances, again. So, I gave her the job of snapping pictures of me talking to people and leaving brochures in places, so I would have visuals for my class presentation part of the project. That kept her plenty busy until they were all gone. In fact, I think she even enjoyed it. Maybe it reminded her of when I was little and she was always helping out in the classroom one way or another.

Whatever it was, she was in a great mood by the time we left for the caves. Better than I'd seen her in months. All three of us were having fun even before we got out of town. The lovely coastal scenery with its lush green palm trees and sparkling clear blue ocean, felt like paradise. The surf here seemed calmer, too, and the waves rolled in more evenly than at our lighthouse. In such a beautiful area—with a boat harbor, beaches, the works—it wasn't hard to kick over into vacation mode.

Riley looks cool this morning. Today he's wearing a white T-shirt with short sleeves that show off his tanned arms, where there seems to be quite an improvement of

muscle mass going on.

"I dig your tan, Riles." I say, and he looks pleased at the compliment. "Looks like you got a head start on it even before we got here."

"It's all that time I spend running dogs over the trails," he answered. "Ever think that army uniform might get hot, after a while, Jo? Shorts would be better."

"Maybe. But I'm determined to stay in character. I might borrow your extra Akubra, again, after we get out of town, though. There's still a few tour offices we'll pass that need a brochure but I ran out, already, so I'll have to wait until Grace and Gideon bring more."

"Okay, but remember to put some sunscreen on, then. That beanie's not gonna' protect your face, is it?"

I give him a "don't boss me" look, but it's only pretend. It's really kind of nice to have someone who sincerely cares what happens to you. Especially when he's right.

"It's not a beanie. It's a beret." I tell him. Because if you can't win the point, distract your opponent with logic. That debate would be a long stretch but I'm up for it. One of the best things I like about being with Riley is that he enjoys a good debate as much as I do. And he never bores me.

"Gotcha'. But maybe you should have taken a hint from your mom and gone with the Foreign Legion uniform. Their hats will at least keep your brains from

baking in the sun.”

I look over at Mom, standing by a shop window display of fancy tea things. Her make-shift neck cover of a handkerchief tucked into the back of her green ball cap does rather look like those hats you see in the old Foreign Legion movies. Having long hair most of my life, I never felt the need of a neck cover but I have since I whacked it all off.

Just before we got to the end of town we stood for a moment looking out at the beach and admiring the view while Mom snapped a few more pictures. There was a designated swim area protected by nets farther down and already the place was starting to fill up with groups of people hauling ice coolers and umbrellas out onto the sand. There were a lot of kids running around. We hadn't been there five minutes when I heard a little voice say, “Hey, it's Shark Girl! The one in the picture!”

Two kids in bathing suits came up to me waving one of my brochures. Obviously a brother and sister. The girl was younger, not much past eight, and she wanted my autograph. Which was totally cool. I guess they had spotted me from a long way off because she was ready with a pen so I could sign her brochure.

“Mom says we can come see you at the wharf tomorrow morning.” She was looking up at me like I was some kind of new super hero, or something. But she was cute as could be with a head full of blonde curls and

beautiful blue eyes. "Ten o'clock, right?"

"That's the time," I answered, putting on my best smile. "I'll be handing out sea creature stickers there, too, so make sure you come up and ask for one."

"Hey, I collect stickers! Don't I, Robert."

"She loves stickers," her brother said. "It's her favorite thing. Where's your sign?"

"Oh, we're just sightseeing, right now, but I'll have it with me, again, tomorrow. How did you know about that? Didn't see either of you down at the boat harbor yesterday morning."

"In the newspaper. Tacked up in the shop where Dad rented our boogie boards. The man gave her that brochure, too, because he had extra and she wanted one so much."

Wow, a fellow ally to the cause? I made a mental note to check the place out on our way back through town. But a newspaper photo? When did that happen? I handed the brochure back and was about to ask more about it when the girl practically knocked me over with a hug and a "Thanks, Shark Girl—See ya tomorrow!" and ran off, again.

"See ya!" I called after them.

"Well, at least you're getting through to somebody," Riley laughed.

"Hey, if we get the next generation we've got the future, right? Remind me to buy some stickers on our

way back, will you?"

"Right," he agreed.

"Oh, that was adorable!" Mom stashed her phone back in her pocket as she walked up behind us. "And I got it all on video for you, dear. That ought to help your grade, don't you think?"

"You bet it will, Mrs. T," Riley answered for me. "I told you how important it would be for you to come with us."

"Well, I can see that, now. But Joanie, what's all this about a news photo? They really should have asked my permission, first, since you're still underage."

"Nobody asked for mine, either, Mom," I told her. "I can't even think when they would have done it. Did you see anyone taking pictures when we were handing out brochures this morning?"

"Only me. And the morning papers would have been in the stands much earlier than that."

"We can pick one up in the motel lobby when we get back from the Limestone Caves, then," I promised. "If we don't get around the fishermen rocks while it's still low tide, we'll have to take the long trail through the rain forest to get there. Pretty, but we want to give ourselves enough time to see the caves first."

"Yeah, and I want to get some rock samples, too," Riley said. "Hey, why don't you take a video of me doing that, Mrs. T? I could use a better grade, myself."

“I’d be happy to, Riley. Anybody want a cold drink, yet? That little stand across the street might be our last chance.”

As she heads over there, I notice how stuffed her backpack is and wonder what on earth she’s got in there. Suddenly my heart sinks at a frightening thought. After yesterday’s attempt to walk out into the ocean, I’m worried she might have some type of drugs in there that she didn’t want to be very long away from. What if she tries another crazy stunt? Maybe I ought to try to keep tabs on what she’s stuffing in there. Or at least not pass up any chances to look into it whenever I can.

“Lovely iced mango juice,” she beamed when she came back. “One for each of us.”

“Thanks, Mrs. T. Want me to carry that pack for you? Could get pretty hot before we get into the rain forest.”

“Heavens, no,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I used to do quite a bit of hiking in my day.”

“But, Mom, you don’t need all that. We should only be away a few hours.”

“Joanie, you know how I like to be prepared. Never know what might happen when you’re out in nature. Living in the outback taught me that.” She takes another sip of her drink, hefts the heavy pack a little more on center for a more comfortable position, and says, “All set,” before starting off ahead of us.

"I don't think we need to worry about her," Riley observes. "The way she's moving out, she'll probably give us both a workout."

"She used to hike all over the place with Dad, during the early days of his career. Then when Ted came along and she didn't need to assist so much anymore, I actually think she missed it."

Riley was right. Mom shaped up great, and we only had to rest once on our way over the top of the fishermen rocks from the land side .

"Isn't it great the way the trail winds around the cliffs?" I ask her. "They're high, though. Kind of scary."

"Yes, dear. But I like the way they jut out like they're standing on water." Mom's face is flushed, her breathing hard and raspy. Is she okay? Hard to tell. She bottles so much up.

"We better not go too much further out," I warn. But inside I'm wondering if I'm always going to be suspicious of her motives from now on.

"Joanie's right, Mrs. T. You don't wanna' go too far out there." Riley uses his serious voice. "Too many fishermen have been washed away by a rogue wave on those rocks. I heard two men drowned just before we arrived. They've even changed the name of another place close by to "Headless at Hacking." For reasons I won't go into right now. Probably why the beach is deserted out here. Ridgy-didge, Mrs. T, you don't wanna' come

down here to swim, unless there are nets around.”

“Okay, we get your drift, don't we, Mom?” I treat Riley to one of my don't-go-all-gruesome frowns. “We don't need to scare her to death.”

I guess I should have filled Riley in, this morning, about what Mom tried to do.

“Not likely to be any swim nets where we're going.” He suddenly turns around, ready to retrace his footsteps. “Anyway, I don't think we should hang around here too long.”

By this time we're standing at the almost at highest point of the cliffs, gazing out at the ocean. Mom still seems breathless from the climb and accepts his outstretched arm to help pull herself up the last step or two.

“This does take a lot of energy,” she pants. “And it is better to have someone to go with, isn't it.”

“For sure, Mom.” I say firmly. She seems to be hanging on every word Riley says, lately. Maybe our trip will end up better than I thought. She appears to be especially interested when he talks about geology too, which she also studied during her own college days.

“You'll love university,” she tells him. “Have you ever aspired to be anything but a geologist?”

“Not really,” he answers, “Took me long enough to think that one up.” Then he turns to grin at me and I laugh. Almost as if he knew I needed to lighten up a bit.

He's been into rock formations ever since I've known him.

"Riley doesn't keep changing his mind on his future, like I do," I said to her. "Look how many times I've changed my career choice. I used to want to be a microbiologist until I decided I wanted to join the army and be a soldier. But now I'm totally excited about marine biology."

But I'm talking to myself, mostly, because Riley has gone ahead to hold his hand out and help Mom down to where the first cave comes into view.

"You girls be careful where you step,now." Then soon enough he says, "Hey, there's the entrance to the first cave over there. See? It'll be dark inside, so, better get your torches out. By the way, neither of you will lose it if a few bats should start screeching as they fly past, will you?"

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I only take a few steps into the cave, when I suddenly notice how wet my boots feel. “Hey! I’m standing ankle-deep in water, Rye. Where’s it coming from?”

“Underground channel to the ocean, maybe. There’s been a lot of mining around here, too, though. Along with two lakes nearby that might feed into them. I’m not really sure. Careful, now. We can’t afford to slip and break something.”

We ease our way inside and inch forward into the darkness. I hear two more clicks as I switch on my torch, immediately becoming lost in admiring the stalagmites and beautiful rock formations it lights up. Mom takes a half-hearted swipe at a few strands of hair in her eyes and moves farther in.

“This is only the appetizer, Mrs. T. The main cave system is farther inland, through a portion of the rain forest. But I wanted to collect a few samples to see if

there was any difference in the wall composition this close to the ocean.”

“These are very nice.” Mom points her torch beam over a low portion farther in that looks like it's filled with water. “Are they inaccessible during high tide?”

“If they are, that's another reason we don't want to stay inside too long. Anybody notice if the tide was coming or going when we were walking along the beach?”

“I really don't see how you can tell if there's nothing to see it changing against.” I move closer to a little green blob just above my shoulder and discover it's a closed up sea anemone. “Wow, we better get a tide table at one of the shops before we come here, again. That guy up there is halfway up to the ceiling.”

“Yeah, we stay here too long and we might have to swim out,” said Riley.

Mom stops in her tracks and starts heading back, taking up lead position, again.

Less than a half hour later, the three of us are walking through an amazing rain forest, surrounded by so much beauty I feel like we're on our way to the Emerald City. In the distance I hear the soothing sounds of a cascading waterfall, blending with the pleasing hum of many varieties of birds. The only one I recognize at the moment was the famous Aussie whip-bird, whose amazing call exactly resembles a whip being cracked.

With so much to look at above and all around us, it's a wonder we didn't trip over the thick vines that crisscrossed their way across the narrow path we're walking on.

“Anyone a starving dog, yet?” Riley asks. “If you are, you'll just have to wait. Because as pretty as all this stuff is, it's crawling with insects, snakes, and other stuff you wouldn't want to sit down next to for very long. There's supposed to be a rest area up ahead, though.”

After a while it gets even denser and turns into a battle between fighting to free ourselves from hanging lantana vines wrapping themselves around our necks every few minutes, and fending off the branches that constantly try to whack us in the face. Not to mention keeping a scan out for those bugs and snakes he was talking about. So when I finally snatch a faint glimpse of daylight ahead, I'm chuffed. This is definitely the most dense of all the rain forests I've ever been in.

“This is the marked rest stop and it looks like there's even a picnic bench over there out in the open. Make sure you look underneath before you plonk yourselves down, though. Never know what might be taking a nap under there.”

Mom and I make a serious inspection before opting to sit on top of the table with our feet on the benches. By that time, Riley has made himself comfortable on a huge rock that looks as if it poked up out of the ground during

some geologic catastrophe.

"I'd rather see something coming at me from the side instead of underneath." He grins. "Okay, time for some tucker. Anybody bring anything? I have half a package of beef jerky and a king-size bag of salted peanuts."

"I had the restaurant put half a dozen sandwiches together for us," Mom said, digging into her backpack.

"Half a dozen—Mom are you kidding?"

"Always best to be prepared, Joanie. We can take home what we don't eat but if we end up fainting with hunger out here, there wouldn't be much we could do about that."

"I agree. What kind are they, Mrs. T?"

By the time Mom and I have shared a chicken salad sandwich—they were huge—Riley was nearly finished with his second roast beef and cheddar. After that, Mom stretched out on the table with her head on the backpack for a ten minute "power nap," and I climbed onto the big rock to sit with Riley.

"Okay, Shark Girl, give. What was the big drama you said prevented you from getting into your half of the manuscript pages, last night?"

"Mom didn't stay asleep after you left. She woke up hardly half an hour later—starving and fidgety—really wired. We had to order more room service. I figured she'd ask too many questions if I hauled those pages out before she fell asleep, again."

“She probably would have thought it was just your homework.”

“Maybe. But she's been so interested in this whole assignment thing I didn't want to take the chance. Besides, the Lord's really been convicting me about doing so many things they wouldn't approve of, lately.”

“That's cool. Not that I can relate much because Dad pretty much lets me do anything I want as long as it's legal. At least he did before Ashlee came into the picture. She's great, though, and I have her to thank for more clean clothes than dirty ones, and real home cooked meals most days. Sort of nice having parents that want to really get into your life.”

“This was more like Gideon and Grace zeroing in on what my spiritual condition would be if I kept doing things my parents specifically didn't want me to.”

“That's cool, too. You've been praying for a youth group to get involved in, Jo, and it looks like you got it. Might not be totally formalized, yet, but it sounds just like what the youth pastor back in Perisher is always telling us. How important accountability is, and all that.”

“Well, whatever it is, it's working. I feel a hundred percent better just not having the guilt of stuff like that weighing me down. I think the Lord is showing me there's better ways to do things than the way I've been doing them, lately.”

Hardly realizing it, I reached for the empty plastic

bags his sandwiches had been in and stuffed them into my pocket so we wouldn't leave any trash. "Anyway, Mom didn't go back to sleep until about a movie and a half later. By that time, I was zonked, myself. I'm really worried about her, Rye. She did something yesterday that—"

"Good to go!" Mom popped up, again, and it had hardly been five minutes.

We had been talking quietly and were far enough away that I was pretty sure she hadn't heard anything. But I definitely didn't want to be whispering behind her back. "I'll tell you about it later."

We walk for another hour, then take another short break. By that time she's breathing hard, with beads of perspiration trickling down her cheeks.

"You okay?" I ask, getting a beaming smile in return. Well, maybe it was a little forced.

"Don't you worry about me, Joanie. I'm a tough old chook."

I have to admit she appears to be.

"We should have been there by now," Riley says more to himself than us. "Actually, I'm beginning to think this map might be a bit off. We haven't even seen a trail marker since the last fork."

"That's odd." I come close to look over his shoulder where he's spread it out over a fallen log.

No wonder Riley is having trouble. There are lines to

designate various trails, all of different colors, and criss-crossing all over the place. I'm one of the few people who know he's colorblind, and that map-reading is especially difficult for him when they're in color. This one was nothing but color.

"Hmm...a mix of red and green, too...the worst kind."

"Yeah, but I've taken that into account and been following the shortest route to the caves according to my geological map. And marking it as we go, too, so we can follow it back, again. But I think something else is off because even that one isn't matching up just right. It's like the terrain has changed, maybe."

"Changed? I thought all this has been here for thousands of years," I object. "That's why everybody wants to see them."

"No, they're more like mountains—they're always changing. Worse even, when you get into these limestone areas that are so near the ocean. That's one of the reasons I wanted to study them. The ground we walk on isn't really all that solid, Jo."

"Before last year I would have disagreed. But we certainly found out about it, first hand, up on Mount Perisher. Well..." I straightened up and shot a look over at Mom and saw that she was exchanging her wet socks for a pair of dry ones. "Think we should turn back?"

"Let's give it a bit longer. I've been tracking the

geological landscape and can tell we're real close." Then he stands up, and the three of us resume a brisk walking pace.

About twenty minutes later we come up on a huge long opening in a low, moss-covered hill separating the trees. Another cave, all right. But there was no sign anywhere stating that this was even the right one. Which seemed more than strange considering most national parks were almost always peppered with information signs and trail markers all the way through hiking areas.

"That's them ahead!" Riley points. "We made it!"

I turn to check Mom out. She looks pale and beat now, and for a minute I feel scared. She isn't a young woman, anymore. What if the changes in her turns out to be some serious health problem? Then I imagine her collapsing, and us unable to get her back to the motel. My heart starts to pound.

Until I feel her arm gently sneak around my waist. "Joanie dear, thanks for persuading me to come with you. I'm thrilled to see the limestone caves, it's exactly the kind of thing that interests me most."

The closer we get to the entrance, the bigger it looks.

"Wow! Look at the size of this cave—it's a beauty!" Riley is over the top with enthusiasm. "Mrs. T, grab your phone and let's take a shot of us all spread out across the entrance. That ought to make an awesome picture."

After that, we turn on our torches and step inside.

“Oh, dear,” Mom says as I follow her, “This cave goes such a long way back. And it's so dark, Joanie. Blacker than night.”

“Well, don't get lost in it,” I warn while I'm trying to keep up as she wanders along. “I'd hate to tell Dad I misplaced you in the depths of some giant cave while we were on vacation.”

All of a sudden I couldn't see Riley. Only the beam of his torch moving along the multi-colored wall off to the right somewhere. Then the chop-chop-chop as he hammered out another sample. I turn my head to locate Mom, again, and she's moved a little too far away for comfort. She's right. It is dark and scary in here.

Then I feel a sudden, heavy hand on my shoulder and jump.

“Just checking on you.” Riley laughs, then runs his hand through his hair like he usually does when he's nervous. “Did I show you my pick with a folding handle for my samples. Neat, eh?”

He goes across to a nearby protruding rock formation and begins tapping, again. In half shadow behind the torch beams he looks like Indiana Jones. Except for that stubby pen hanging from his mouth that is so totally Riley. Which makes me laugh.

Then he calls out, “Hey Mrs. T! Don't get too far ahead of us.”

A few seconds later, I can just make her out turning

around to come back. Next minute she stops, and I see the flash of her camera. Haven't seen her enjoy anything so much in years.

"The light's better near the entrance than further back, Jo. And dig those beaut colors on the walls over there. Hope there's no clay deposits underneath the limestone, though. That would be bad news."

"It's amazing." I run my hands over the contours, feeling a smidgen of their enthusiasm, myself. Until I become aware of cold water dripping down the back of my camouflage shirt. "Drat! Where did that come from?"

"What." Riley spoke but he didn't stop tapping.

"There's water all over the place in here," I told him. "It's even dripping off the ceiling."

"Not a good sign. We better keep close to the entrance and not stay too long. I wish I could have brought Ding with us, he's got a sixth sense when it comes to knowing if it's safe to walk on something, or not. I think he's pretty disappointed at having to stay in the kennels so much, too." Then he calls out, "You okay, Mrs. T?"

"Yes, Riley."

"Let's stick closer together and give ourselves about five more minutes. Then we'll head back. Too many things that don't feel quite right around here."

"Oh, but we only just got here," Mom says as she

keeps snapping pictures. There was the unmistakable sound of a splash and then, “Oh, for heaven sake. That one's as big as a tide pool,” she mumbles more to herself than us.

“A tidepool?” Riley sounds horrified. The sound of his own scraping stops. “That could only mean one thing.”

Riley, the geologist. This time I see his silhouette bend down to put his folding pic axe away in one big hurry. “Time to go, girls. I'm pretty sure we've seen enough. Of this one, anyway.”

“If you're not happy about all this water, then maybe we've seen enough of all of them, Rye. The waitress at the diner said they had major flooding all over the area, last week. Her whole yard was under water for days.”

“Ridgy-didge? We better call it a day and head back to the motel, then. Limestone and water don't do good things when they mix for very long—especially if there's clay underneath. You coming, Mrs. T?”

“Yes, I'm just putting my phone away.”

She's farther in than we are, and while we wait, I'm squinting, flashing my torch around, and just waiting for the rustle of black shapes hanging upside down. Suddenly I hear the most terrifying cracking and splintering sounds coming from somewhere close.

“What's that? Bats?” Mom asks. “That loud rumbling noise, it sounds like....like an earthquake!”

After that, everything clicks into slow motion.

“Get out of here, Jo!” Riley roars as he charges into the depths to reach Mom.

His arms are outstretched but he doesn't get very far before the ground we're all standing on falls out from under us. Then everything goes black.

21

Falling...falling..down...down into the pitch blackness. Mom screams, Riley shouts my name, again. Seconds seem like minutes as we drop through space. My backpack falls off, along with one shoe, but I'm still falling. Then I bump against something hard which scrapes my arm and slows me down enough to realize I'm being dragged along the wall of the cave. Why can't I feel the ground? Am I suspended in mid-air? It's impossible to see.

Just when I thought I stopped, I'm on the move again. This time it's more of a jerky slide downwards, at the same time being pushed along the wall. My feet are scratched and bruised. Then they touch dirt, as something bounces off my head, knocking me off balance, only to end up sprawled flat out on the ground. I try to open my eyes but they are already open and I can't see anything. There's two torch beams farther down but they're stationary, having dropped from hands as soon as we started falling.

“Riley! Mom! Where are you?” I called out into the

sudden silence.

“I’m—over here—Joanie.” Riley’s voice.

“Where’s Mom?” The only thing I can feel is terror.

“Mom—where are you! please answer me!”

“S—s—all right, love. Don—Don’t worry. Ohhh!”

Oh, no! she’s in pain. “Riley—Mom’s hurt!”

I see the torch beam come to life, as if he had just reached over for it, and turned it in the direction of her voice. Suddenly it picks up her crumpled form as he waves it around. “I see her!”

She’s lying on her side but a wave of thankfulness washes over me that we are all alive and still together. Riley keeps the light on her and I can just make out his form behind it. The two of them are only a few yards apart. “Mom!” I call out to her. “Where does it hurt?”

“Crawl over here, Joanie,” Riley says, but there’s something wrong with his voice. “Careful, though. Keep your hands out front as you go.”

I follow the light, barely able to make out more than just his dim outline behind it. At least we have one of our torches. My right hand lands on something soft. “My backpack. Thank heavens!” I scoop it up to drag behind me, until seconds later I reach both of them.

One of Riley’s large hands pulls me close and I feel better. “It’s okay. We’re all okay.”

“Mom, are you hurt bad?” The torch reveals splotches of blood on her clothes and my heart begins to

pound, again.

“I don't think so. Just sore and scratched. I seem to have bumped against things on the way down.”

“I did, too. What happened, Rye? Did we fall down an old mine shaft, or something?”

It's so dark, I can only just make him out, trying to get to one knee, except he can't. Instead, he lets out a yell and slides back down into a sitting position, clutching his foot. “I must have busted my ankle! Can either of you see my backpack? Maybe I can use my pick to prop myself up with.”

“How bad is it?” Seeing him crumble when he tries to stand, I'm afraid of what I'll hear.

“Dunno. OOOhhhhh!”

“Hand me the torch and I'll take a look.” It kills me to see Riley in pain. “I've never seen a break before but I reckon I'm looking at one, now.”

“Maybe just a sprain,” he mumbles. “A bad sprain can be as painful as a break, they say. My ankle can't be broken. It can't be!”

“Uh-oh, it's swelling fast. I remember our youth group medic said that usually indicates a broken bone. What do you think, Mom?”

“A bad sprain can swell like a fracture, too,” she answers. “But you shouldn't put any weight on it just in case, Riley. You can lean on both of us when we hike out.”

“Mom? Can you stand up? Try, but sit right down, again, if anything hurts.”

“All right, dear, I’ll try. But I really think I’m okay, just pretty shook up.”

She tries, but being such a large lady, the effort makes her groan. Another try and she finally makes it shakily to her feet.

“Mom—oh, thank goodness!”

“Just a few bruises and scratches, Joanie. Don’t worry about me. Honestly. Oh, here’s your backpack, Riley. Lying practically right next to us.” She hands it to me and I turn back to Riley. Head in his hands, he jerks it up when I start to move away.

“Riley Williams, don’t you dare move one inch until we see what we’ve fallen into,” I tell him as I feel around inside his backpack for the pick and then unfold it to its full two feet. Can’t see how that could help much, considering how tall he is, but I hand it over, anyway. Mom, have you got your torch handy?”

“Yes. It’s right here.”

“So at least we have two. Good. Can you walk around behind him a little way to the right? I’ll take the left. We need to get our bearings.”

“No!” I hear panic in Riley’s voice. “You can’t do that.” Then he suddenly goes quiet, and I realize he’s trying to cope with the pain. Poor Riley. I take a deep breath and creep very slowly to my left, groping ahead

with my free hand. Making pretty good coverage using my torch.

Then I get a fright when I notice the ground seems disconnected from the wall over here. So, we better not move around anymore until we talk things over.”

“Can you tell how far down we are?” he asks.

My heart is thumping away in my chest as though I'd just completed a marathon. “A long way. I hope the batteries in our torches last.”

At this point I'm hanging onto that huge torch of Riley's like it's Joan of Arc's sword. It's one of the biggest I've ever seen—maybe twenty inches long. Mine and Mom's are just small carry ones for a backpack or pocket. Right now, this torch is my sword—at least till we get out of this mess. So, I look around and point it in every direction.

“How are we going to get out of here, Rye? I don't know where to start.” He doesn't answer, so I shine the light on him, again.

“Hey! Don't flash that thing in my face. I'm trying to think.”

“I have some pain pills in my backpack, Riley,” Mom offers. “I'll get some for you.”

“What kind of pain pills, Mom? What are they for?” I know she keeps all kinds of stuff in her bag, but I had no idea she used pain pills. Anyway next thing, Mom peels her backpack off and starts digging around it in

with the light from her own little torch.

“Thanks, Mrs. T. But we should figure out what to do, first, before I go taking stuff that might make me sleepy.”

“Oh, yes, you're quite right,” she agreed. “I didn't think of that.”

“When you were walking just now, Mom, did you feel okay?”

“Yes, dear. I'm good. This is one time I'm grateful for being so well padded.” She pats her hips and I can't help but smile. And looking at the condition Riley is in, I have to agree with her.

“Tell us everything you can see from there, Joanie,” he says. “So we can decide what to do.”

“Okay. Well, there seems to be only one option.” I don't need to mention that my mother is old and overweight, with goodness knows what else wrong with her. And Riley is injured. So, no matter how much we all discuss things from now on, I'm pretty sure there's only one answer.

It's me that will have to get help.

“Looks like the ground just inside the entrance gave way in one piece. One minute we're there, and the next the whole section we were standing on falls away. Then we rode it all the way down to...” I move the torch beam as far past the two of them as it will go but it stops about twenty feet beyond, in a pile of broken rock. Off to one

side I spot a pretty fast stream of water trickling over it. "To wherever this is, anyway."

"How far down are we?" Riley asks, again. "Can you see daylight anywhere up there?"

This time I don't use the light beam, only stare up into the dark we came from until I catch a faint—very faint—glow from around a rock or a bend up there. "Just a bit but not very bright. About fifteen to twenty feet high, I would guess."

There's another bright flicker of light. Mom is trying to test out her phone. "No signal," she pronounces. "We better not hold our breath waiting for that."

"Let's save the battery in case we need it for light, later on," I suggest. "What have we fallen into? Think it's a mine shaft, Rye?"

He's doing something but I'm not sure what until he snaps on the light on his own phone. That's when I see that he has stuck the handle of the pick into his hiking boot and is tying it to his leg with a shoestring. "Not a mine shaft," he said with a determination I knew he was using to fight the pain. "A sinkhole."

"But we've obviously come to a stop against something," Mom points out. "And if it's only fifteen to twenty feet high..." Her voice trails off and I know her mind is running through all the possibilities. "Maybe we can pile up a bunch of rocks and climb out."

"Maybe," Riley agreed. "But that better be our

absolute last resort. Sinkholes are like quicksand in slow motion. Moving the wrong ones could bring the whole place down on top of us. Our safest bet is to try for a rescue. And Joanie's the only one who can go."

I was already back to running the huge light beam over the wall, looking for the best place to climb up. "There's quite a gap between the ground and where I have to climb," I reported. "Reckon I'll have to be careful not to slip into that."

"Oh, that would be terrible!" Mom gasped—as if even the thought had taken her breath away. "Just terrible!"

"Don't worry, Mom, it's too narrow for me to slip very far in even if I do." But just to make sure, I edged carefully over to point the torch down inside.

"What do you see?" Riley wanted to know.

"Looks like huge broken pieces of stalagmites wedged in. And a..." I scooted closer and bent my head down.

"Joanie—get away from there!" Mom suddenly panics. "Get away from there this instant!"

"It looks pretty solid, actually." I slid back from the edge so she wouldn't have heart failure. "Those things are like stone pillars holding us up."

About that time my foot bumped into something solid—but lighter than rock—that slid back when I pushed against it. I turned and shined the light over there.

“Hey, a sign. Probably the one you were looking for, Riley. It says...just a minute, it's upside down.” I moved to the other side and began to read. *“Hazardous area! Occasional rock slides, sinkholes, and flash flooding!”*

“Oh, dear God!” Mom gasped.

“I didn't even think to bring a rope!” Riley moaned. “I was thinking oceans and flat places, not mountains. Now, look at the mess I've got us into!”

“You didn't get us into it, Rye. This sign was nowhere visible when we got here, so, the ground must have been shifting before we even came. Just like you said.”

“Oh, dear God!” Mom said, again, and this time it was more like a prayer.

“You're right, Mom, it's time to pray. I know we've never prayed as a family before but Riley and I have been praying together for a long time. And God's never let us down, yet. Right, Riles?”

“That's for sure. If ever we needed a miracle, we need one, now. Let's pray for some wisdom on this deal, too. Because we're going to need a whole lot of help real quick.”

“Amen,” I agreed.

“Amen!” Mom piped up.

Which surprised and pleased me so much it was like fresh energy pouring into me. “All right. If I'm up to bat, first, I say let's get this game on and get out of here!”

22

“Start looking for the best foothold to boost yourself up,” Riley speaks like he can read my thoughts. “We’ll plan it together. Let’s move our torches over the walls, girls. We need a ledge—anything Joanie can stand on to pull herself up.”

“What about that dark patch over there?” Mom moves her beam around the area like a laser pointer, so we know where she’s looking.

“No. You’re not looking high enough, Mrs. T. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but Joanie’s swimming has given her the strongest pair of shoulders I’ve ever seen on a girl, so it’ll be a piece of cake for her to pull herself up. Right, girlfriend?”

“But these walls are so slippery,” Mom mumbles as she does what he suggested.

Once or twice we get excited about a potential spot, but nothing passes Riley’s scrutiny.

”We have to look higher. Think you can manage if

Joanie were to stand on your back to make the first two cuts, Mrs. T? ”

“The first two cuts?” That gives me a start since I've never cut into solid rock before.

“Yeah, there's not enough to go with—especially since you've never done this sort of climbing before. You're gonna' have to cut your own foot and handholds with that rock hammer your mom brought along. Mine's too long for you to deal with and hold onto at the same time. Besides, she's right about it being slippery. Can't take any chances about not being able to hang on.”

“I can't stand on top of Mom,” I objected. “Not full grown, I can't.”

“Joanie, I've been carrying you around since you were a baby.” Mom catches up with the conversation. “You know I've always been strong.”

“Not lately, Mom. You haven't been well.”

“I've been tired, that's all.”

“Tired, or tired of?”

She's still sweeping her light over the higher portions of the wall as we talk. “Well, it's the same thing, isn't it? Your father and I are having some difficult issues to work through since Ted's disappearance and I'm worried sick he'll do something foolish. Doesn't do any good though, once he sets his mind on a thing.”

Are we talking about it now? In front of Riley? After I've been trying to bring up the subject for months? Is

Mom back to her old self, again, and ready to let me in on what's been bugging her? But if the 'problem' is only about Dad, then it's no real drama. A flood of relief washes over me which adds even more to my strength and confidence.

“There it is.” Riley spots it the same time Mom and I do. “That's where you need to make your first cut.”

Mom goes over to rummage through her backpack, again. “Thank heavens I got this rock hammer put away before everything gave way. It even has a clip to fasten to your belt, dear.”

“I don't have any clips on my belt, Mom. There wasn't one with the uniform. It has a nice deep pocket on the side of the leg, though, I can stick it in there when I need to.”

“Take a rest when you need to, Jo. Don't think you have to do everything at once. Better safe than sorry, I always say.”

“She'll do fine.” I can hear a touch of pride in her voice. “She gets it from me, you know.”

In the darkness, I smile at Mom with her bragging rights.

“How's that, Mrs. T?”

“Joanie's upper body strength. She gets it from me. I was a member of our girls' rowing team for the last three years of Uni. We won every race we entered, and I really built up the muscles in my arms, shoulders, and

back. At my peak, I was even able to bench my own weight. I may have added a few pounds now, but I'm still strong."

Sometimes my mom is full of surprises. Hashtag—not always good surprises.

"You still okay with this, Jo?" Riley must have sensed my hesitation. "No need to pound too hard on this stuff. Just chink, chink, chink—nice and steady. That should do it."

"Right." I try to look confident. But I'm new at this heroine stuff, and unsure how to fake it convincingly. "You two sit tight and I'll be back with a rescue party before you even finish off those last two sandwiches."

I take a couple minutes to find the extra pair of tennis shoes I brought along since I can only find one of my hiking boots. I had shorts in my backpack, too, in case my uniform really did get too sweltering as we hiked along. But it was cold this far down and I had no desire to change out of it, anymore. Now—more than ever—I am trying to project myself into the head-space of Joan of Arc.

Becoming Joan lately, didn't happen for nothing. After all, it was my admiration for her bravery and determination that led to me learning to swim with sharks. To stand up for something other than myself. But it wasn't until coming to this moment that I was convinced I finally fully understood her. Because that's

when I realize there is something harder than facing life or death, no matter what way it comes to you.

Being in this situation, I know there is something even worse than that. It's the incredible pressure that comes when you discover that—if you fail—somebody else dies. Especially if it happens to be people you love more than anyone else in the world. That doesn't just make it harder, it makes it almost impossible not to carry through. Sort of like “the give” they often talk about when an animal will sacrifice itself in order to save its young.

But if you truly believe—as she did—that God is with you and will give you all the strength you need to do something like that, then you are literally compelled to do that brave thing. Without holding back or caring about your own safety. Simply because of what is at stake. The lives of those you love. In a way, I feel I'm about to face the flames, too. But I'm not afraid, anymore. I know God won't let me fail. Why? Because I'm not finished with my mission, yet.

And I aim to finish.

He will keep me from slipping before I reach the surface, and He won't let me fall down the gap between the walls and the ground. He will keep Mom and Riley safe as they wait on that little island of land until I can bring back help. I'm sure of it. But then two seconds later, when I stand up and look back, I cringe at the thought of

leaving them. A picture of the whole place collapsing down on top of them flashes through my mind and, for a moment, I'm rooted to the spot.

"Get it done fast, Jo." Riley must be reading my mind. "Your mom and I will look after each other. We have enough water and food for a week if we stretch it. Even pain pills if things get worse for me. Right Mrs. T?"

"Of course. You're the one we will be thinking about, Joanie. Are you sure you can find your way back once you get to the top? We came such a long way and it seemed so confusing at times."

"All I have to do is follow the trail, Mom. But Riles, what if—"

"Heck, Joanie, it's only a busted ankle. I've got two." He laughs in his typical joking way but I can't so much as muster a smile.

Mom's ready for business, though, and drops down on her hands and knees, as close to the edge as she can get without losing her grip on the solid ground next to that ominous space between us and the wall. The atmosphere is heavy with seriousness. And we all know exactly what's on the line.

"Remember, Jo. Take all the time you need with every cut, before you step off." Riley warns.

"I will." I give the rock hammer I'm holding a friendly pat. "And I'll bring back a rope. With about six huge Aussie bull wrestlers to pull on it to get you out of

here.”

He gives me such a sweet smile I want to cry. Because I recognize the ingredients in that smile. It's a mixture of love, fear on my behalf, and regret he can't do this for me.

“Try to remember everything you learned from when I took you to that indoor climbing place back in Jindabyne, last year.” A pause, and I sense he has a new worry. “You do remember everything, don't you?”

I smile and nod, but my mind is somewhere else. Scrambled in every direction. What was it, again? Oh, yes. Make the cuts deep enough for at least three quarters of your foot. Not too close but not too far apart, either. Oh my gosh—what else?.

“Well spaced...deep...” He's reading me, again. “Make two cuts before you step off your mom. One for your hand, but big enough to step into as you progress. If you strike clay, just move on. Remember to keep your cuts far enough apart so they don't meet and collapse.”

“Maybe you should take a sandwich.” Mom chirps, like she forgot to pack my lunch for school.

“No, thanks. Ready, Mom?” I put one tentative foot on her back and look at Riley one last time.

“Remember what we always say when we leave youth group?” he asks.

I know the phrase by heart. “Fear not—for God is with you.” We recite together, both of us putting our

hearts into it. And that gives me all I need.

Seconds later, I'm on Mom's back and looking for the best place to start my first cut. The first for my hand, then one for my foot.

I hear Mom's gasp. Ignore it, I think to myself. Concentrate. Calm down. Get it right first time. That's the kindest thing you can do for her, right now. You might give her a backache today, but she's going to be feeling on top of the world tomorrow. Getting out of this fix is going to make her believe there isn't anything she can't face and figure out in the future. I'm sure of it.

I'm chinking away at the first spot they chose for me. Good. My hand fits in there snugly, but with enough room for my foot when I move up. Now, my second cut.

“Okay, I'm done. Ready to step off, Mom.”

No answer.

I step off.

Make your next cut. Test. Slowly, now. Don't rush. Stay where you are until you're certain the cut will hold.

Dark. It's so dark down here! But Riley has the torch light trained right where I'm cutting in. Don't look down. Start working on the next niche. Then, another. My hands tremble. Hold tight to that hammer. If you drop it, you're dead. No turning back. I'm in another world, now. Nothing exists except the sound my hammer makes.

Chop, chop, chop. Pick the dirt loose. Scoop it out. Test what you've done. One last look...

Step off.

Chop, chop, chop. Scoop the dirt out. Test. One last look...

Step off.

On and on I go. No rest possible. Arms aching, my back aching. So tired. Don't look down. How much further? Don't think, just keep going.

Inside I'm screaming. How much longer can I keep this up? Don't look down!

Will I even have enough strength left when I'm there to pull myself over the edge? Even my strong shoulder muscles are aching. I've never had to sustain my own weight for so long before.

"You're doing great, Jo! And once you're out, don't hang around!" I hear Riley yell but I'm past halfway now, with nothing left in me to answer him with.

Chop, chop, chop. Dig dirt out. Test...

Step off.

Suddenly there's nowhere left to go. My fingers reach some kind of edge and stretch out to feel grass beyond. Daylight hurts my eyes. I made it! I'm at the top!

Except I'm too tired to haul myself out right away, so I just hold there for a few minutes. "God help me. Please." I whisper.

"Get going, girlfriend!" I hear Riley call. "Where there's one sinkhole, there may be more ready to go!"

"If it takes everything I've got," I make my vow out

loud, "I will pull myself up out of this rotten sinkhole!" I yell to whatever is holding me back.

"Atta' girl!" Riley hears me, and laughs.

But Mom is quiet and I'm praying I haven't hurt her.

Next minute, I'm scooting away from the edge on my belly—far enough away to feel safe, again. When I finally stand, my legs are like jelly under me. I start to stagger away, when I hear Riley calling, again.

"Joanie! If you have any problems finding us—get Ding!"

"Okay!" I gasp, with no idea whether he heard me or not.

The minute I'm clear of the sinkhole I pull my own phone out of my pocket and try Triple Zero. I get a signal, but no operator. Just a series of clicks, then it goes dead. I punch in Riley's Dad's number. Same deal. Then I try my father's phone number and get a dial tone but the end result is the same. I can't reach anyone.

So, I take off at a run.

My phone will connect with a tower as soon as I'm close enough to a service area. Not long after that I'm standing at the entrance to the rain forest, digging around in one of my other pockets for Riley's map. It's nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, already, and I stop for a few swallows of water, then sit on a log for a minute to study it. A person could survive for a week on just what they could stash in the pockets of an Army uniform.

“Oh no!” I suddenly say out loud. “This map isn't going to help me at all!”

It's Riley's geological map, with no names written on it. Just elevations and things I have no idea what they mean. His line is clear but it doesn't go any farther than what I assume to be the picnic spot we had lunch in. Or, maybe it's the log where he looked at the map for the last time. I'm just not sure.

I jump to my feet and look around in every direction. Don't recognize anything, anymore. I'm completely lost in all this rain forest. A place where some of the deadliest snakes and spiders live, too. What's worse, I can tell that sunset is no more than an hour, or two, away.

“Lord, show me the way out.” I'm not talking to myself, this time. “I know I haven't done so well listening to you in the past but I'm trying with all my heart, right now. Please show me the way!”

23

One last swig from my water bottle, and I zone out—feeling weirdly relaxed, considering I'm sitting in the middle of gosh knows where. The familiar sounds of Aussie bush music soothes me, despite the life or death decisions literally waiting for me at every turn. The cracking call of a whip bird, and that scary thump-thump noise Emus make. Then comes my favorite. The shrill, laughing call of a Kookaburra that sounds exactly like humans when we laugh.

Stretch up, straighten my tired back and shoulders, and it's time to choose. Which path? The one to the left appears unused. The other one is much better maintained. That seems more likely for a popular tourist hike to the limestone caves. In the fading light, I choose the right path.

I don't want to get caught here after dark and am anxious to see something—anything—familiar. But when I step into the next clearing there's no picnic bench there. Every move I make seems to require a choice—another decision. And the worry that I'm not on the same trail we took swamps me. Trust Him, Joanie, I tell myself. You asked for help, you're going to get it. Have some faith!

Then all of a sudden I don't feel so alone. God has my back and I know it. That knowledge gives me confidence and my panic starts to melt away. When all this is over, I want nothing to do with anything even remotely connected with limestone, ever again. How could Riley even think of working in an environment like this? A person would need nerves of steel.

Except even that wouldn't have made any difference, today, because there is no rhyme or reason to these occurrences. Oh man, I am so over being dead center in the middle of dangerous situations! Then—all of a sudden—I recognize something. Finally! A parting of the trees and... rocks ahead. The fishermen's rocks!

I jog toward the opening with renewed energy and catch the familiar sight of them jutting out into the ocean. But there's no one out there, right now, not even one person. What on earth should I do? I can either dive in and swim across to the next beach—which looks like quite a long way--or take the trail through another patch

of rain forest that dips all the way down to the sea. Easy choice. There's no way I'm getting lost in that jungle in the dark. And it's getting darker every minute.

"But this isn't your beach, Shark Girl," I remind myself out loud. "There will be dozens of sharks in the water and not all Bull sharks, either." But it's the only way I can think of to do what I have to do. There's a thin strand of beach about halfway across, and I figure I could make it in about twenty minutes. After that, it gets rocky, again, but I recognize the more popular rock jetty that borders the far end of the boat harbor and I'm pretty sure my phone should work from there.

"Help me, God!"

I check carefully for submerged rocks, then begin walking across them, searching for the best place to enter the water. These rocks are even more jagged than the ones we climbed around today, and I'm hoping nothing pierces my shoes. "Don't cut yourself," I warn. "You don't want to do anything silly, like bleed into ocean around here."

A few minutes later I've found my spot. I make sure my waterproof pocket that holds my phone and the map are closed tight, then ease in. I set a sight line on the closest end of the beach. From there I know I can call for help and get back to town. I could never have done this if I hadn't been practicing every day. Especially when my reflexes kick in and I realize I'm not one scrap afraid.

I'm primed for this.

I stick with the breaststroke for minimum splash. Yes, this is much better than being hopelessly lost in a rain forest. At least I know where I'm going, now. Suddenly, I spot a dark shape gliding through the water beneath me. A shark. Cruising for dinner, probably. My body tenses and I tread water to keep as still as I can. For a moment, I feel a flutter of fear...but he swims smoothly past me. Huge relief. Then he turns around and picks up speed to head straight back in my direction, again. I'm using minimum splash—trying not to upset that shark--feeling every fiber of my body tense up. Then he turns away at the last minute, and I let my arms make another slow sweep.

Weird thoughts flash through my mind as I swim. Can sea creatures sense I'm non-threatening in the same way one notices if a stranger on land is friendly or not? Then I see another dark shape. Different than the last one. But I blink and it's gone, also. Too fast to identify. After a while, there are so many sharks around I kind of get used to them. So, I continue my even, steady stroke. Relaxing as much as I can under the circumstances and trying to maintain my pace. God is with me. He's bringing me through this.

Little by little I draw closer to the shore. Another sweep of my arms to part the water in front of me before returning them to my sides. Exhale. Repeat. Over and

over, again. For a split second my heart races when one of the sharks swim up too close to me, barely below the surface, and I force myself to keep my stroke even and not splash. I feel so confident and peaceful I know it can't be all me. I'm getting some sort of supernatural help here. Like Daniel in the lion's den.

I'm surrounded by sharks, now. There's another one. Straight as an arrow it comes toward me but passes on by. The God who created sharks is with me. He's got a protective shield around me—I just know it. “Fear Not. For God is with me,” I whisper to the rhythm of each stroke. This is the answer to our prayers. Meanwhile, my arms keep doing their job. Sweep wide, return to chest, exhale. Repeat. I wonder if my special Bull shark with the torn fin is swimming around somewhere nearby. Would he protect me, again?

Then I see a familiar shape below and wonder if I actually sensed him. Every fiber of my body, soul, and spirit are on high alert, I wouldn't be surprised. Yes, there he is with his torn fin. He's here! Yeah! I laugh out loud with the realization and pure excitement of it. He's moving right along beside me and he knows who I am—I'm sure of it.

Deep, wide strokes, arms return to chest, exhale. Repeat. It feels like I've been doing this for hours and hours but it's less than a half hour really, until finally, I look down and get a shock. I can see the bottom. Another

stroke and my toes touch solid ground—I can stand up. I made it! The thought is so exhilarating I'm jubilant. But where's my shark? Gone, already? Having him for an escort comforted me at just the right moment. I'm pretty sure he did it on purpose, too. Escorted me to safety. Now—since his mission is over—he'll head for deeper water, again.

“Thank you, Lord!” I whisper as I drag my weary body up onto dry sand. “Even the sea creatures obey you!” Then I just lay there for a few minutes, breathing hard and totally exhausted. When I attempt to stand, I stagger a couple steps and almost topple over but manage to break into a slow jog. From here, I can see the street where all the fishing companies are and I fumble in a pocket for my phone.

No dial tone, or battery. The screen is black. But I'm so close to help now—I'm almost there. It's almost totally dark, now, but there's still a lot of ground to cover between me and the street lights. It isn't long before the beach runs out and I'm walking on rocks, again. By that time, I'm so exhausted I'm light-headed, and force myself to sit down for a few more precious minutes before pressing on. If I trip and injure myself, I'm pretty sure no one would be passing anywhere close to here before morning.

Except by the time I try to stand up, again, my whole body seems to cramp up and I can't. I should never have

stopped moving—what was I thinking? Get up—get up—my heart urges. Riley and Mom are depending on you! But I can't.

Instead, my body refuses to co-operate and I slump to the ground.

The next thing I become aware of is my phone is ringing. A loud, clear tone as though I'd just charged it. I fumble around in my pocket, again, until my hand closes around the familiar case.

"Hello?" I whisper, almost afraid to speak too loud in case it quits on me, again.

"That you, Joanie? It's Gideon."

"Gideon?" I sputter his name, feeling tears of relief spring to my eyes. "Oh, Gideon, it's an answer to prayer! Where are you?"

"About fifteen minutes away. Are you guys up for pizza tonight? There's this—"

"Listen—just listen—in case my phone quits, again! Mom, Riley, and I fell into a sinkhole exploring the limestone caves. Riley hurt his ankle so I had to climb out and go for help. But I'm flat out exhausted and still on the edge of town with the jetty rocks to cross over and it's getting too dark to see. I need help."

"Call Triple Zero, then stay on the line so they can track you," he says quickly.

"I've been trying to but I had to swim part of the way and my phone hasn't been working till now. It's a major

miracle you could even get through, Gideon!”

“No worries, I’ll call them, too, but don’t hang up—keep the line open even if you think it’s dead.”

“Will you get hold of Riley’s parents, too? They should be back at the motel by now, with not idea where we are or what happened.”

“In case we don’t talk, again, tell them they’re stuck about twenty feet down just off the main trail to the caverns. They’ll need a rescue team with ropes. And Ding if we can’t manage to find them. The ground around there doesn’t conform to the map, anymore.”

“OK, I’m on it. Better stay put so you don’t get farther off the track than you are, already.”

I was so relieved I couldn’t answer for a minute.

“Joanie, you do know you’re not alone, don’t you?”

“Yes—I know!” I practically choke on the words, but get them out.

“You’ve got the most powerful force in the universe on your side. Right? A good time to talk to Him. I’ll see you back at the motel. OK, hang up.”

I hang up and punch in Triple Zero—even the screen is lit now.

“Thank you, Lord for sending Gideon.” I whisper. “He really will make an excellent youth leader, he has all the right qualities. The way he came through for me, I wouldn’t miss those meetings, now, for anything.”

My phone works long enough for Triple Zero to pin-

point my location. Only a half mile from town, so they'll have someone there in a few minutes. By that time, Gideon will have reached the motel, and organized a rescue team. I begin to feel less scared, and more hopeful.

As I wait, sitting in total darkness, I listen to the night music of the Australian bush. Crickets, owls and other sounds I can't identify. But it doesn't scare me, anymore. The Lord is with me and help is on the way. For the first time I contemplate Joan of Arc at times like this. I had often wondered how she could still go forward with what she felt was right, despite feeling afraid, sometimes.

I think I know, now, how she was able to do that.

She did it by not letting her fear stop her.

24

When I finally drag my weary body into the motel reception area, all I can do is collapse in a heap on their front counter. I'm sure it was a shock for the pretty, red-haired receptionist there. To see someone turn up wearing a soaking wet Army uniform about two sizes too big, head down, and panting with exhaustion, struck her speechless for a moment. My beret feels like a swimming pool has been installed in it and my shoes are making loud, squelching noises whenever I move.

“Oh! Have you been in some kind of— boating accident? Why—you're Shark Girl!” Next minute, she's coming around from behind her desk with a hand towel.

“No boat—” was about all I could manage just then. “But, yes—there's been an accident!”

“Where at? You're all wet—where have you been?”

I couldn't pass that opportunity up, no matter how exhausted I was and gasp, “With the sharks.”

“Oh, crikey—” came a loud, exasperated male voice from behind me. “Not another shark attack!”

At the same time I turned around to see who it was, there was the bright flash of a camera in my face. “Hey

—what do you think you're—" Wham! There went another flash.

"Give the girl a break, Peter!" The receptionist came out from behind her desk and gave him a shove even though she was only two-thirds his size. "At least let her catch her breath!"

"Just doing my job, Luce."

"Well, there's no rescue vehicle going to show up in here, so, go do it outside!"

He let her push him out the door but not before he said to me, over her shoulder, "I want to talk to you, Shark Girl—I got news for you!"

She slammed the door after him and hurried back to me. "Newspaper people! Sorry, love. He was waiting for information on some hikers that fell down a sinkhole, this afternoon, and the rescue team—"

"That's me—that's my mom and my boyfriend trapped down there!"

"You're Joanie Thomas?"

"Yes—yes! One of the rescue trucks just picked me up from the beach and brought me back. I stopped in here to use the phone because—"

"I've got all kinds of messages for you, already. But first, I'll connect you to Mr. Williams in room—"

"That's Riley's dad!"

"He's been calling every ten minutes. Told me to get in touch with him as soon as you got in. Go ahead and sit

down before you drop, and I'll bring the phone around to you. My name's Lucy, by the way."

"Thanks, Lucy." I stagger over and practically fall into one of the bright chairs. It's covered in orange, leather-like plastic, so no need to worry about getting it wet. As a beach motel I guess they have people coming in wet, all the time. "How long do you think it will take for the rescue team to get here?" I ask her.

"They come from all over town but they'll be organizing right out there in the car park. I'd say not more than—hello, Mr. Williams? I have Joanie Thomas here for you, now." She came around the counter, again, and gave me the office cell phone.

"Mr. Williams?" I start talking before I even hear his voice. "'Did Gideon tell you what happened?'"

"Yes, Joanie. We went straight over to pick up Ding and we're on our way back to the motel, now." At the sound of his calm, patient voice, I lose it. Next thing I'm crying, which is unfair to Mr. Williams. But what do you say to someone whose only son is trapped down a sinkhole?

"We're almost there, love, so try not to panic. They'll be okay until we can locate them. I'll talk to the rescue guys and find out what their plans are. See if they'll take Ding and me with them. This dog could find Riley underwater if he had to, and he already senses something's up."

“Thank goodness! Because I'm not exactly sure where we were! Riley has a broken foot and with Mom definitely on the heavy side, it isn't going to be easy!”

I sound a little hysterical even to myself and, without thinking, raise the towel and swipe at another drip cascading down my face from my hair. Then try to wipe a drier bit of mud from the side of my forehead but it seems stuck there. Get a grip, Joanie, I think to myself. Nobody will let you go with them if you can't get yourself under control.

“I should go, now, Mr. Williams. I haven't connected with Dad, yet, and still need to change into some dry clothes before we leave.”

“Okay. I'll let you know the plan as soon as I find anything out.”

I end the call and notice my shaking hands as I try to connect with Dad's office, again. It goes right to voicemail. But I'm not too worried since I expect he'd be traveling as soon as he got my first message. Suddenly my teeth begin to chatter. I'm so cold. My uniform is sticking to me and I feel like I'm about to collapse, again. Can't think straight, anymore, and can barely hold the phone. I only hope I can make it back to my room.

Next thing I know, Lucy is standing over me, again. “Girl, you're as cold as ice!” she pronounces. “You've got to get these wet things off. Come on. I'll help you back to your room and you can get in a good hot shower.

I'll ring room service, too. A little something to eat and a cuppa, you'll be feeling good as new."

She helped me up and linked her arm in mine as we went through the door. Then leaned her head close with a confidential whisper. "Anybody snaps another picture on the way down, it'll just look like we're the best of friends."

"Thanks, Lucy. Right now, I feel like you really are."

"Well, it's not every day we get a celebrity in the office! I just wish it was under better circumstances."

"Me, too."

She used her master key to let me in because I left mine in my backpack. Then she plugged in the electric kettle so a hot cup of tea would be waiting as soon as I got out of the shower. By that time she had even come back to set a bowl of soup and a grilled cheese sandwich from the restaurant on the table, too. Along with a cell phone and a note that said, "Keep this for however long you need it." After that my strength started coming back and I began to collect all my senses, around me, again.

I had just finished up and was sipping the last of my tea when there was another knock at the door. It was Riley's dad. He gives me a big hug, and we sit down to talk at the table.

"I've been speaking to the Chief, Joanie. He'll give us a cooee when they're ready to go."

"Oh, if only I hadn't gotten confused finding my way

through that rain forest, they could have been rescued by now!”

“No need to blame yourself. That happens all the time to folk a lot more experienced than you. So the Fire and Rescue Chief says. Did Riley use a map?”

Oh, here it comes. “Yes, he did. But not one of the colored ones the National Park Service hands out. Even though he had one of those along, too. But you know how he is with color mixtures, so he was mostly using a geological map. I have it right here.” I pushed it across the table toward him. “There’s no names on it—just elevations and stuff—which I couldn’t make head or tail out of trying to get out of there, again. Because I don’t know anything about that stuff.”

“Numbers are a lot easier for him than colors.” He slipped his large backpack off and set it on the floor while he dug out his water bottle to refill at the little sink. He had red-brown hair, was fit and well-filled out, like Riley was always trying so hard to be. Probably one of the reasons he had been working out with weights ever since I had known him—he had a pretty big goal to achieve if he was going to turn out like his dad. But he was getting there.

“Besides that, he only marked his map about three-quarters of the way to where we ended up,” I explained. “But the thing is, Mr. Williams, everything changed out there. That’s what Riley said. So, nothing much lines up

with either one of those maps, anymore. Except maybe some of the trails. Anyway, I think that's what really threw us off."

When his phone rings, I jump. And from his end of the conversation it sounds like the rescue team is almost ready to leave. After he hangs up, he doesn't say one way or the other, just resumes our conversation as if there's been no interruption. How he can stay so calm and cool I don't know. But it helps me feel calmer.

"You're right, Joanie. Riley's map could be more of a problem than a help but we'll offer it to them, anyway. They won't hear of taking Ding, though, because they've brought their own tracker dogs that are already familiar with the area."

"Won't let him go—what are they—"

"Hold on and let me finish, now." He put the freshly-filled bottle back into his pack as he talked. "I gave them a sweater of Riley's so they could pick up his scent. Now, we need something of your mother's I can give them, too."

"But—"

He raised a hand as a signal to let him go on. So, I went to rustle around in her suitcase as he talked.

"At the same time, the Chief's a good old bloke who really knows his stuff. He told me, while it was his responsibility to stick by all regulations..."

He paused so long, I stopped rummaging and looked

over at him.

“There was nothing he could do about civilians who might take it upon themselves to take off in their own vehicle about ten minutes after they do—with their own resources—and do whatever they have to do.”

“Yes!”

“However...” He waited until I brought back a lime green T-shirt with a flower design on it that Mom liked to wear and handed it over to him. Then, when he was sure he had my full attention, again, he went on. “Only if they agree not to interfere with his search. Understood?”

“Yes, but what if—”

“Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, then. So, here's what we are going to do. Since I'm a member of a medical team and certified for mountain rescues, they're going to let me ride along with them. Just me.”

This time, I don't interrupt. I just sit quietly, waiting for him to go on because something tells me he's making a decision—right at this moment—whether he will let me go, or not. If he can trust me not to mess things up. And it only took him about two seconds. Which set my heart pounding at the thought he might say, no.

“Which leaves you, and—”

There's another knock on the door and I'm on pins

and needles waiting for those next words, though I answer it as calmly as I can.

“Gideon!” He’s wearing a long sleeve shirt, jeans, hiking boots and an Akubra hat. “Yep. You’re good to go,” I practically drag him inside. “You did it—I can hardly believe it! Hey—” I poke my head out, again, and look around. “Where’s Grace?”

“She had to stay over another night in Sydney, but she should still get here in time for tomorrow. Oh, and Ashlee decided to stay out in the car with Ding for a bit, Mr. Williams. He’s getting more wound up by the minute.”

“Yeah, he knows something’s up. We’ll have to be careful and keep him on the lead or he’ll take off without us.”

Us? Am I in? Without even thinking, I throw him one of my quit-fooling-around looks that I use on Riley when he pushes me too far. And—surprisingly—he gets the exact same gentleness in his eyes and gives in.

“Which leaves you and Gideon to bring Ding.”

“Oh, Mr. Williams!” I almost have to blink back tears I’m so relieved, and cover it up by giving him another hug.

But when I start to pull away, he holds on to me tight for a few seconds more and says, “You’ve been incredibly brave today, love. You saved their lives. We never would have known where to look in time if you

hadn't done what you did.”

“The Lord helped me. I never prayed so hard in my life!”

“Well, if the Chief wouldn't have let you go, I'd have found some other way to get us all in there.” Then he looked over at Gideon. “And I have a lot to thank you for, acting as fast as you did.”

“I was just at the right place at the right time,” Gideon replied.

“I think that's his goal in life,” I added.

“Hey, I like that,” Gideon grinned. “It's true, too.”

There was the sound of Mr. Williams' phone, again, and he grabbed his out of a pocket. “All set? I'll be right out.” He flipped it closed and looked over at us. “Okay, this is it.”

25

Ding jumps into the front seat and leans up against me as soon as I climb into Gideon's Ute. Almost as if to say, don't you worry, girl, I'll find him. Weird how he seems to know exactly what's going on. Doesn't surprise me, though. I learned long ago that outback dingoes know things. They're different from normal dogs. They don't even bark like normal dogs. Some Aussies regard them as nothing more than feral dessert dogs. But most of us know they are hands-down smarter than ordinary tracker dogs.

And they never quit.

"What's up, Jo?" Gideon's eyes are kind when I look over at him and I so get it why God has called him into His service.

Now, I can't help blinking back tears. "It's just that they've been down there so long and I can't stop thinking of Riley's last words."

At that exact moment, Mr. Williams sticks his head into the open driver's side window, in time to hear me, and finishes, "If you have any trouble finding us, get Ding," he repeats. "And my son is right."

He's got a coiled rope around his neck and one shoulder, now, and is wearing a climber's harness in case he might have to go down into the sinkhole, himself. "Thought I better come over and stir him up a bit before you take off," he said. "Here's what I want you to do after you get there. Drive as far in as you can, then find a trail you're sure you've been on. Make sure you keep Ding on the lead until you don't know where you are anymore. Then let him go."

Now, he reaches across to put a hand on the Dingo's head as he talks, and I saw Ding go immediately on alert the second he touched him. "When he finds them, he'll probably come right back to let you know because he won't be able to get down there by himself. Snap his leash back on and give us a cooee when he does. We should be close enough to hear you on this walkie-talkie I have for you, here, and we'll be right behind you with the rescue equipment."

A tremor went through Ding and he gave a soft but excited whine.

"Ready, boy?" Mr. Williams asked and immediately the dingo was up on all fours. "Let's go get him, then."

A truck that had a large winch on the front bumper went past, first, and Mr. Williams headed over to the off-road vehicle behind it.

We watched as he joined the group piling into the second vehicle. He tossed his backpack in and they took off. When Ding saw that he whined and set up an almost frantic pacing between Gideon and I on the seat.

“We're going, boy, I soothed. “In just a few minutes.”

“He's just excited. Did you see the size of those tracker dogs in the back of that truck? They were huge. No, worries, though. Ding may be smaller, but he's a dingo. It counts for a lot if you have a dinki-di dingo on the job. Especially one trained as well as this one is. Mr. Williams sure looked ready for anything, too.”

“He's probably just as experienced as the Chief,” I tell him. “He's had to rescue climbers on Mount Perisher lots of times.”

Never has ten minutes felt so long. While we wait, I can't help thinking of all kinds of impossible scenarios that start torturing my imagination about just how they are going to get my mom hauled out of there without the whole place caving in. Then two minutes later, I'm envisioning my Dad sliding off the road somewhere because he's driving like a maniac to get back to us.

“Don't worry, Joanie,” Gideon breaks into my nightmarish thoughts. “As good as all these guys are at what they do, we know who's really in charge, don't we. And we know everything's gonna turn out all right. No matter what happens.”

“Yeah. I just have to keep that at the front of my mind instead all the other stuff.”

“That's the secret.” He started the engine and we eased out into the road.

In my mind I'm reliving the route we took to the caves. “Mom, Riley and I climbed right to the top of the cliff face.” I pointed to the towering shadow as we passed. “We walked for ages and only stopped once. Except I don't remember crossing this main road, anywhere, so I don't see how that could be.”

“Maybe it isn't the same one.” He slows down and pulls over to the side for a minute. “Stick your torch out the window and see if you recognize anything familiar about it. Sure would give us curry if we make a mistake before we even get out of the truck. You reckon you followed a trail on the back side of it and went into the rainforest before you even got to the park entrance?”

“Probably. From town we followed along the beach, then took one of the hiking trails that lead to the first limestone cavern. But that's not going to help us, right now.”

“Why not? If you went there you left from there. Right? At least Ding could start picking up a scent. Doesn't mean we have to go inside, just get our bearings from that particular point.”

“Because that was just a small cavern on the outskirts of the main system. One that gets totally

submerged during the high tides. We probably wouldn't even be able to find it in the dark.”

I'm squinting at a massive palm tree, all by itself to one side of the road. “That looks familiar. I remember I admired the way it was set back from the others. Kind of weird, with practically no fronds, at all. And now that I think about it...”

I turned in my seat and stuck my head and shoulders out the window so that I could throw my torch beam down the road and look behind us. “I think it's like you said. The trail we were on left the beach before we ever got to this main road. Not very close to the beach at that point and pretty high above it when we started climbing to the top. We never came to any official park entrance with a car park or anything.”

“Let's look at the tourist map, then, and see where the caverns are in relation to the entrance.”

I took it out of my pocket and spread it on the dashboard in front of us. “Hey—” I pointed to a spot I had my torch trained on. “Here's a picnic place marked right here and the trail from town leads right up to it. I'm sure that's where we stopped for lunch.”

“Okay, so if we head for the main entrance of the park and leave the Ute there, that will cut a couple hours off the trail you took from town. First objective, get to the picnic place.”

“Except we veered off onto other trails a couple of

times after that. I'm really not sure which ones. I was worried how my mom was doing by then and wasn't paying much attention."

"Then that's where Ding comes in. According to this map," he said running a finger along one of the colored lines that fanned out in all directions, "we should hit the first cavern if we keep turning left every time there's a choice to change directions."

"Except I'm pretty sure we didn't get to that one. There are several caverns in the system, and since we came in from the backside we might have turned right and headed to one of the others. Riley was using a geological map and headed for a certain elevation, I think. But I had to give that one to Mr. Williams for the rescue team. Riley wasn't using this tourist map much because of all the colors. He's colorblind and some of the lighter colors actually disappear when they're overlaid on brighter ones.

"Then we'll just head for the picnic area and let Ding take it from there. And pray we don't waste any time on this thing and the Lord guides our steps even when we don't know where we are."

It's a relief to finally get out of the car, even when Ding begins jumping all over us, like he senses he has work to do. I can only just see Gideon standing a few feet away, it's so dark and dense in the rain forest although there's a full moon above us, somewhere. Suddenly I'm

starting to wonder how we will even get to the picnic spot, much less to the sinkhole.

“We just have to get on the right trail and we're good,” Gideon sounded a lot more confident than I felt.

“How do we even know which one to choose?”

He trains his torch beam on a sign with a picture of a picnic table on it. “Can't get any plainer than that. Let's go. You keep your torch on the trail so we don't trip over any vines or creepers, and I'll keep mine straight ahead of us so we don't run into any low-hanging branches. Oh, yeah...” He does a quick arc from one side of the trail to the other. “And try not to brush up against any bushes if you can help it. All kinds of things crawling around on them this time of night.”

“Like I really needed to hear that, right now.” I repositioned myself so Ding would be on one side of me and Gideon on the other. “Dad always says just make a lot of noise. Then everything smaller than you will get out of your way. Even most of the big stuff.”

Gideon laughed. “I forgot you come from outback, too.”

“Yeah, so don't mess with me.” I gave him a firm but teasing shove. “Or I'll tell Grace.”

“She's gonna' hear about it, anyway, or I don't know women.” Which made us both crack up, and me feel a whole lot better.

We were at the picnic spot in less than an hour. But

about the time I was thinking I would have to walk back and forth over the whole place before I could find the same trail we took off in when we left, the leash jerked in my hands. I grabbed on tight and Ding practically dragged me over to where Riley and I had sat talking on the large rock so many hours, ago.

“He's got it—he's on it!” Gideon caught up with us. “Go ahead and let him go!”

I bent down to unclip the leash. “Find Riley, boy! Find Riley!”

Once around the rock, nose to the ground, and then he takes off across the clearing and into the forest.

“That's the one,” Gideon held his torch beam on the trail until we got there. “Let's try to keep him in sight as long as we can. If he gets too far ahead we'll have a long wait until he gets back. At least Riley and your Mom have each other for company, all this time. But just picture it, Joanie. Right this minute she might be telling him all your secrets.”

“Very funny. But I think I've pretty much told him those, already. They are totally comfortable with each other, though. I wouldn't even be on this trip if he hadn't talked her into coming.”

“That's cool. Hey, look at him go!” Ding is jumping over logs and racing way ahead of us. “He's got a scent, all right. Let's hope it's not a rabbit.”

Within a few seconds Ding has darted off totally out

of the range of our torches. We laugh, but deep inside I'm nervous. What if he just hangs out there waiting for Riley without coming back to us? I'm not sure at all about which trail to take after this one, and I definitely don't want to be making excuses to the local police if we end up getting lost, too.

"Wouldn't surprise me if Ding sniffs Riley out, then has to come back and fetch us, too." Gideon's thoughts are obviously running along the same lines as mine. But he laughs at his own joke like that would be no big deal.

About the time I decide to take a lesson from him and quit worrying about situations before we come to them, this trail I thought we stayed on for a long time comes to an abrupt end up against an embankment of some kind. "Oh, no!" I moan. "We took the wrong one—Ding went the wrong way! We didn't have to climb over anything like this, it was flat all the way."

"Yeah, that was before the sinkhole opened up. This whole area could have shifted. We gotta' trust the dingo. Why don't you take a drink of water and chill for a minute." He takes off his backpack and fishes out a couple of bottles. "Here. Take a few deep breaths, too. Something familiar will jump up and smack you in the eye if you look all around careful enough."

I sit down against the side of the embankment and do what he says, willing my heart to stop pounding. I sip from my water bottle, and breathe deep before starting a

slow scan off to one side with my torch. Everything looks like everything else. What's to tell one tree from another, out here? All of a sudden I'm totally exhausted all over, again. I can feel tears threatening but I don't want to lose my grip in front of Gideon.

But then there's a thump and rustle above my head and just as I let out a squeal, thinking it's some Tasmanian Devil, or something Ding nuzzles the side of my face then flops panting onto my lap. But only for a second. Next thing I know he's hopping up over the embankment, again, before looking back down at us, as if to say, "You guys coming, or not?"

"What did I tell you?" Gideon climbs up and over, then reaches a hand back to help me up after. "Gotta' trust the dingo!"

"It's like he knew we stopped, or something." I throw my torch beam after him as he takes off. "Like he's watching out for us at the same time!"

"I gotta' admit I was surprised Mr. Williams let us come out here on our own like this. But now I realize he knows a lot more what Ding is capable of than we do."

"That's because he grew up training sled dog teams in Perisher Valley," I told him. "Same as Riley."

"Really? He told me he worked at a hospital."

"He does, now. He got out of it after his dad died. The only reason Riley still runs teams is to help out Mr. Never. Used to, I mean. Right now, he just does it to help

his daughter, EG. Mr. Never died under...”

Ding slipped out of our line of sight, again, and I aimed my torch beam back onto the trail. “Under unusual circumstances, not long after my dad's medical assistant, Ted Griffiths disappeared. Trying to figure all that out is what Riley and I have been doing most of last year. It's all pretty mixed up, though. And it sure has taken a toll on both our families.”

“That's rough. I never heard of anyone named Mr. Never.” Ding's head popped up at the end of the trail to check on us, then popped out of sight, again. “But I sure have heard plenty about a guy named Ted Griffiths.”

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“What?” For a moment I was so shocked I stopped in my tracks and turned my torch beam on him.

“Hey, watch out—you’ll ruin my night vision.” He put a hand up out of reflex but it was already too late.

“Sorry. It’s just that...” I pointed the torch down onto the trail, again. “It’s just that we’ve been looking for something—anything—the slightest little clue about him for over a year and you just happen to—”

Next thing I know, Ding crashes into me and would have knocked me down if Gideon hadn’t reached out a hand and held onto me. Then he circles around us a couple of times and trots a few feet away, only to come back and run into me, again.

“Joanie—he found him—he wants us to follow!”

Which Ding must have understood because I couldn’t believe how fast he took off after that. Then Gideon and I are racing after him, trying to keep up. Gone are the jungle vines that tangle themselves around our feet. The ground is flat, now. A small cleared area which I seem to remember. Yes, I’m sure of it! There was definitely another clearing just before the opening to the

cavern. Not a big one, but enough to allow light to break through the trees.

“This is the way it was when I climbed out of the sinkhole!” I’m half shouting as we chase after Ding, while attempting to flash light from our torches as we move along.

“Where did he go? Can you see him? He disappeared, again!” Gideon is bent over a little, breathing heavily as I come up beside him.

“Ding?” I flash my torch beam low to the ground in front of us. “Where are you, boy?”

All of a sudden, I spot him just off to the right, resting under a palm tree and looking back at us, panting. “There he is! This is it, Gideon! That’s where the ground split open—it’s where I climbed out! Mom—Riley!”

I start over to call down to them but Gideon holds me back. “Wait a minute, Jo! Take it slow and careful. You don’t want to fall in, again. Let’s move up to where Ding is. We know he’s in a safe spot.”

“Riley!” I shout, again, but there’s no answer. Can’t he hear us? Are they both dead?

“Coooooeeee!” Gideon’s voice booms past my ear so loud it almost deafens me. Then we wait a few seconds, neither of us saying a word, just hanging on for a response.

Any response. Please God, just one word to tell us they’re still safe in there.

Then I hear Riley's familiar voice and instinctively grab for Ding's collar. Good thing I did too, because suddenly he's jumping up and down with excitement and giving an excited howl.

"We're here! Both okay! Didja' bring some tucker with ya?"

My heart soars to the skies and it's all I can do not to bawl. Gideon steps a few feet away to check in with the rescue team on the walkie-talkie and I hear him talking but am too excited to listen. Instead, I shout down into the hole, again. "Mom! Mom—how are you!"

"All right, love!" I hear her strong comforting tone and know it's true. "Better than Riley—got enough in reserve to go days without eating!"

Nothing before and since has ever looked so good to me, as the sight of the three men climbing out of the rescue truck. I grab Ding close and clip on his lead before realizing the tracker dogs must have been left farther back with the other vehicle. Right away, the Chief and a helper begin to edge up close to the sinkhole, well back from the edge. They begin discussing how close they can bring the truck and the best place to lower down a line.

When they return to set up the winch, Mr. Williams walks over to us. "You trusted the dingo," he said to Gideon and I with a smile. "Good on you! And good on you, too, Ding!" He ruffled his fur and then walked over to the trunk of the tree we were all standing under and

looked up at the closest limb. In a few moments he had thrown the end of his rope over it and tested it for weight. “Back in a minute. I’ll just see what’s going on, down there.”

With that, he swung out over the hole and lowered himself down with all the grace of a spider riding down on its own web.

“Crikey,” Gideon whispered. “I gotta’ learn to do that one of these days.”

Now, the Chief and two other men are attaching a rescue harness to the end of their line before the whir of a small engine starts up to extend the winch arm out over the sinkhole. Almost. They are about ten feet short and motion for the driver inside to inch forward. Slowly, slowly...less than a third of the way one of the front wheels begins to sink.

“Hold it!” the Chief yells and motions for him to back up, again. “Going to have to haul them up by hand. Ben. Take a walk around the perimeter and find us the best place to lower a man in.”

“Williams is down there, already, boss. He went in over by that tree.”

“Okay, let’s go a branch or two higher then tie onto his line, in case something gives way. Lower the harness down first, though.”

The man named Ben refastened it onto a different line and shouted “Look out below!” before tossing it in.

But instead of the sound of a satisfying “plunk!” as it hit bottom the line stopped moving about halfway down. He tried pulling it back but it was snagged fast between a cluster of rocks at the edge of the hole. At that point, he moved carefully out to disentangle it but small rocks began to slide into the opening well before he got to the edge.

He went back to the truck for more discussion.

Gideon and I looked at each other. “Mr. Williams might have to climb up from the bottom and get it,” he said.

“He isn’t much lighter than Ben,” I answered.

“Don’t go getting any crazy ideas, Joanie.”

“Do you have a better one? I’m lighter than all of you. If you would just go over and volunteer to help haul up the line, that would distract them plenty long enough for me to untangle it. Come on, I already know it will hold me, I climbed out of there once, already.”

He looked hard at me and hesitated for so long I thought he was going to say, no.

“Better take Ding, so he doesn’t try to come along and give me away.”

He reached for the lead without saying a word and started toward the truck. That’s when I learned something awesome about Gideon. Even though he didn’t totally agree with me, he still jumped in one hundred percent to back me up.

“Hey, Maties!” He called out to them before he even got there. “Need any help hauling that up? I’m as strong as a Mallee bull!” Then he flexed the muscles in one of his arms just to show them and they hooted and laughed and drew him into their circle.

By that time I was halfway to the edge.

“God.” I pray, “Did I remember to thank you for sending Gideon to help us?”

I’m crawling flat on my stomach, as fast as I can, totally unnoticed. A few minutes is all I need. I concentrate on keeping my weight spread out evenly. No jerky movements. Easy does it. Only four feet to go....three... Finally I’m pulling myself up to the rock the rope is stuck on. “If God be for me....who can be against me?” I recite the first scripture that pops into my head. I think it’s from the book of Romans. A second later, I’m reaching for the rope, wedged tightly into a jagged cut in the rock. I tug hard. Nothing. But after one more big pull, I have it out!

“Watch out below—here it comes!” I shout. And when I hear the wonderful sound of that rope with a rescue harness attached, hitting bottom, I begin to back away to safety, again.

“Hey out there!” I hear the Chief’s irritated call and know he means me.

“Isn’t that just like a woman?” Gideon covers for me with his good-natured laugh. “Everybody ready?”

After that, they all move into position like a well-oiled machine. Disaster averted. They've got more important things to think about than me at the moment.

A rescue.

"I'll pray!" I yell over to them as I motion for Ding to come back to me when Gideon drops his leash and points in my direction, sending the little dingo trotting happily back. "You'll need all the help you can get pulling my mom up out of there!"

"Life and death are in the power of the tongue." Gideon quotes confidently, looking directly at the Chief. "Lucky us! That's from the book of Proverbs, sir."

The man looks mildly amused, like he's wondering just who this kid is.

After that it was easy.

When we finally all get back to the motel less than two hours later, and the Rescue Team is packing up their gear, the rest of us head first to the room where Riley and Gideon will be spending the next couple of days. He gives me a cheeky grin as Ashlee and his dad settle him down into a comfortable chair, inside.

"We knew you wouldn't let us down, Shark Girl," he says to me. "Your Mom took care of me just fine. We got a lot of talking done, too, keeping each other's spirits up."

"You're the greatest, Mom!" I tell her, giving her a hug and meaning it with all my heart. "Thank goodness

your ankle is only badly sprained, Rye.” I glance down at his foot, now expertly strapped. “Does it still hurt?”

“Of course it does. The medic says it's the worst sprain he's ever seen, and I have to be waited on for six months. With extra food and milkshakes every two hours to strengthen my bone density. ”

How wonderful to hear him sprouting off with his usual rot. “You must have been out of your tree with boredom being stuck down there for so long. How long did the food last, Mom?”

Mom smiles, and I can't believe how much like her old self, she sounds. “If it was up to Riley, we would have finished everything right after you left. But I held some back until this morning.”

“That sounds like Riley.” Mr. Williams laughs. “I better take Ding back to the kennels. Now that the emergency's over I imagine the no pets rule will be back in effect.”

“Don't worry, boy. There will be some good tucker waiting for you.” Riley croons a goodbye to Ding, then points to his dad. Ding goes over to him and sits obediently as his lead is clipped on.

“Dad, is it too early order three large pepperoni pizzas from room service? I'm starved.”

Mom laughs along with everyone else, then toddles off to our room, with me hot on her tail. I don't feel like letting her out of my sight for a minute, I'm so glad to

have her safe. But I can relate to that pressing desire for a hot shower after the ordeal is over. I can't believe she isn't simply falling into her bed just to get enough energy to clean up. I should be overdue for a good sleep myself, except that I'm wired, now that everything is over, and want to at least spend a little time with Riley.

Mom heads to her suitcase for some clean clothes and I grab my phone off the charger, now that it's fully charged. "I better call Dad, again, and let him know everything's okay," I explain when she looks over at me with a troubled expression.

"No! Not yet, Joanie. Please. The sun is barely up. You left a message, didn't you? I'm sure he won't be worried."

"Yes, of course. I left him another one the minute you were rescued. Which makes a total of four. I'll bet you anything, he's flying."

"No." Mom sets her things down and comes over to sit down at the table for a minute. "The truth is... Joanie, dear..."

"What, Mom—what!" All of a sudden I'm panicked, again.

"Your dad won't be coming, I'm afraid. And I... I don't think we'll be hearing anything from him for a very long time."

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“What are you saying? Oh, Mom—what are you saying!” I’m practically hysterical, now, and I can hardly breathe I’m so upset.

But instead of making excuses, she just sighs and puts a comforting arm around me and holds me tight for a minute. “I’m so sorry, dear. I can see right now, I should have told you a long time ago. You’re quite grown up, Joanie. I saw that, today. Not a little girl, anymore.”

“Mom!”

I’m about to jump to my feet but she grabs both of my hands and looks me straight in the eyes. “Your dad and I have had a serious disagreement.”

“Don’t tell me you split up,” I murmured more to myself than her. “Please don’t tell me that—you guys love each other!”

“Of course we do. And we always will. That isn’t it, at all.”

“What, then?”

“He got another message from Ted. Cryptic. But he was quite sure of it, this time.”

“Oh, no! The last one wasn’t even real—and he

almost got himself killed that time! If Riley hadn't saved him, he'd be—”

Tears filled Mom's eyes but she didn't totally break down and I knew in that moment that she had finally come to grips with everything.

“He went back to the outback, didn't he.” I whispered. But I knew it, already—I could feel it in my heart—because I knew my dad and I knew that's what he would do. If there was the slightest hope that Ted was still alive, he would go back and try to find him. No matter how dangerous it was for himself to set even a foot there, anymore.

She nodded.” Ted would have done the same thing for him, he said. And he's right. I've been so selfish letting you be the strong one instead of me these last few months, Joanie. And it hasn't been very good for you, either. But all that's over, now. We'll face whatever happens, together, from now on. All of us Thomas women are strong, it runs in our family. And I never saw that so much as how you were with those children, yesterday. And then how you faced all the dangers of bringing help back to us, this morning. Your father would be so proud!”

“It's the Lord who's made me strong, Mom. Especially since we came to Shark Heads. I didn't think I could take another move but, now, I wouldn't trade it for the world! And if He can keep me safe from the sort

of things I've gone through in the last twenty-four hours, He can help Dad bring Ted back to us, too. I know He can--they will come back to us!"

"I believe you, dear. And I'm sure the Lord has a few things to say to an old chook like me about having more faith in Him, as well. It's not like we don't know each other some. My old auntie used to take me to tent meetings back when I was a little girl."

"Hey, maybe we can go to church with Grace and Gideon some time, then."

"Maybe we can. But right now, I'm headed for that good hot shower and a few hours sleep. Make my amends for missing the pizza party, will you?"

"Sure, I will." I gave her a hug and got up to head for the door. "I probably won't be that far behind you, once I settle down more than ten minutes in one spot."

Once outside, I hurried past the five doors before Riley's room and burst inside without knocking, thinking the party was going on without me and wondering how long I would have to wait before we could get a few moments alone. I had to tell him that Ted was alive and Dad had gone back into the outback, alone, to get him. That he could be in danger this very minute—and we knew what had happened the last time he tried to do things by himself. But Riley certainly couldn't be driving anywhere, soon, with such a terrible sprain on

his gas peddle foot.

That's what was going through my mind when I realized there was no one there, but him, sitting all by himself in the chair, with a far-off look in his eyes.

"Where did everybody go?" I asked. "Did you have to settle for bacon and eggs instead of pizza at this hour?"

"Naw, they're gonna' make it up for me special. Dad and Ashlee went to catch some sleep and Gideon left to get his stuff out of the Ute and pick up the manuscript pages EG faxed over for us, last night. He's a pretty cool dude, Joanie. He really came through for us, too. Feels like I've known him for years. He's like the kids at youth group--the ones who really care about you."

"Yes, and Grace is the same way. Can't wait until you meet her, today, too."

"Hey, what's wrong, girlfriend? Looks like you've seen a ghost." He held his hand out to me and I went over to sit down on the floor beside his chair.

"Dad took off for the outback, Rye— Ted's alive--he heard from him!"

"I know. Your mom told me."

"She told you and didn't tell me?"

"Well, I was there and you weren't. She told me a few other things, too. With all that time on our hands there wasn't much else to do." He thoughtlessly ran a finger back and forth over my thumb and it was good just to sit next to him and feel that everything was safe and right, again.

“What sort of things? Why did she have those pills with her? Does she have any left?”

“They were left over from her knee surgery and had a few refills still on them. She remembered how they made her sleep all the time and I guess that's what she wanted to do while your dad was away and she had no way to know what was happening to him.”

“Which makes sense considering those two are hardly ever apart when he is home. It's a cop out, though, because she wasn't up to doing anything. Not even cooking and she usually loves that. She started to forget things, too. Like eating meals if I wasn't there, or getting dressed or undressed.”

“But get this—she didn't touch one pill the whole time we were down there, Joanie. Said she'd been taking too many lately, and needed to stay alert for me. After a few hours she admitted she needed to stay more alert for you, too. How she'd been missing too much of your life, lately.”

Breathing deep with contentment, I'm thinking how proud I am of her. She didn't let us down, after all. Not when things really mattered. So, maybe that strong Thomas woman was still inside somewhere.

“And you'll be glad to hear that when the team was getting us out, she told me she was done with depending on pills to solve her problems,” he added. “In case you're still worried.”

My heart was singing when I heard it. “Wow...do you think she really means it?”

“Oh, she means it all right. Just as she was being lifted out, she chucked the bottle as far as she could down into that hole. Saw her do it. I knew you would love hearing that.”

“Oh, Riley, you'll never know how much. It means I have my mom back, again.”

“And me?”

“Yes, and you, thank God.” I get up on my knees and reach over the chair arm to hug him. “One more step toward normal for us. You think we'll actually get there some day?”

“Once we get your dad back and finish whatever it was Mr. Never wanted to do with that land he gave me, we will.”

“But it's hundreds of miles away and the medic said you have the worst sprain he's ever seen. How in the world can we?”

“Same way Ted's dad got through the war—I'm gonna' depend on my friends. Come on, now. Help me up.”

“Riley Williams, you're supposed to sit around with your foot elevated for at least two weeks!”

“Who told you that? Better to keep things limber, I always say. Give me a hand up.” He reached over to grab hold of me but I moved out of the way, too fast.

"I've been living around doctors and hospitals all my life, I've heard it dozens of times."

"Not from someone who grew up climbing mountains and wrestling dog teams you haven't. Watch this." He pushed himself up from the chair and onto his good foot in one smooth motion and hopped in a circle a couple of times before he started to topple over. "Uh-oh—look out!"

"Riley!" I rushed to catch him before he fell over.

But he lifted me off my feet and kissed me, instead. "Gotcha!" Then he laughed. "Can't always believe what you see, Shark Girl."

The door suddenly banged open and Gideon tumbled in with three pizza boxes, a huge duffle bag, a box full of mail, and a mop under one arm. "Hey what's going on in here?" He dropped his duffle bag on the floor and set the boxes on the table.

"Joanie just saved me from falling over." Riley set me down, again.

"He tricked me," I said.

"Yeah, that's what it looks like," Gideon teased. "Here." He handed the mop to Riley. "That's the best I could do for a crutch. Nabbed it from housekeeping."

"Hey, it'll do for now." He stuck the mop-end under one arm and tried it out. "After the clinic opens up, I'll get one of those old-timer's canes. Then I'll be good to go anywhere."

“What's in the box?” I asked.

“Crikey!” Riley moaned when he saw the size of it. He dropped into one of the chairs at the table. “That manuscript is turning out to be long as an encyclopedia! How many pages did EG send over this time?”

“Just a few in a manilla envelope.” Gideon said. “The rest are all messages addressed to Shark Girl. The newspaper was being flooded with them until they found out it was Joanie. Some reporter brought them over to the motel. And get this, he wants an interview with you before we set up down at the wharf, this afternoon.”

“What?” I went over to the table to look.

“Yeah, whatever you've been doing down there it must be right because the whole place is buzzing about Shark Girl. Did you know there are pictures of you up all over the place? They're pretty good, too.” Gideon pulled a couple of newspapers out of the box and slid them across to me.

“Oh, my gosh, Rye—can you believe it?”

“You're gonna' ace your science project, Jo.” He laughed. “I can see that, right now.”

“Room service dude was just going off duty, and the next one was delivering donuts to a fishing boat. So, I picked up the pizzas, myself.” Gideon opened one of the boxes and handed the whole thing over to Riley. “One for each of us.”

I had never had pizza for breakfast or eaten one all by

myself. But I was hungry enough to try anything and figured the two of them wouldn't have any trouble taking care of leftovers.

"Thanks for the tucker, Lord!" Gideon said before bogging in.

"Fastest food blessing I ever heard," I answered.

"Works, though." He grinned.

I picked up a handful of yellow papers out of the large box that all the messages were written on and looked at the first one.

"Read some of them out loud, to us," Riley suggested.

"Best one's on top," Gideon said around a mouthful of pizza.

"You read my mail?" I gave him one of my best stink-eye glares.

"I had to wait for the pizza. Besides, it's still a group project, isn't it?"

"Of course. I'm just kidding. Truth is, I was going crazy waiting for you guys to show up. Let me see, now..." I started in on the first one. *"Shark Girl, we like your style. Interested in a place on our team? We have an offer for you! Call Staci for an appointment so we can talk. Greenpeace, Australia—Riley, it's Greenpeace—I can't believe it! The people at Greenpeace want to talk to me!"*

"You earned it, Jo." He looked over at Gideon. "You

know I was supposed to work in a shark control company this summer? Now, she's got me thinking I shouldn't be in such a hurry to kill off everything in the ocean that moves. No matter how ugly they are.”

“Wow. Before you even see the Shark Girl DVD, too.”

“I can't wait to see it.”

“Better eat your breakfast first. Might make you lose your appetite.”

“Me—lose my appetite?” Riley pulls a silly smile in my direction and it makes me laugh. “I'm surprised this girl has gone so long without me having to get her out of trouble, lately.”

“Who got who out of trouble today?” I remind him. “I'd say we're even on this saving each other's life thing. Now, listen to this one. *'Dear Shark Girl, don't cry. We love you. My best friend and me.'* Awww... how sweet is that? Except how am I going to recognize them if they stop by the wharf, today? They didn't sign their names. I wasn't crying, though, I was praying. Right then, anyway.”

“Could be you found your gift, Joanie,” Gideon said. “It's a lot easier to get a good message over to kids than adults. Especially if they like you. But if they love you? They'll do anything.”

“It was the shark safety cards. Mostly due to Grace's artwork. Here's another one. *“Shark Girl, How about an*

interview at twelve o'clock? No more pictures without asking. Peter, Lucy's reporter friend."

"I reckon this is the time I should confess it was me who tipped off the newspaper," Gideon admitted. "I told them when you would be down there if they wanted to catch some great shots for a human interest story."

"I didn't see anyone taking pictures."

"I did," Riley said. "But I figured he was one of those types trying to sell pictures of people and their catch of the day."

"We need all the reporters we can get on this deal. Since Grace and I are going for an award winning documentary for our video class project. After tomorrow, I'm hoping some of those kind of messages will be coming in for us, too."

"Oh, I'm sure they will, Gideon" I look up to make sure he knows I'm not joking, this time. "You and Grace were the ones with the camera experience and that's what made it happen. Without that I'd still be limited to writing the typical school report and giving a class presentation."

"You were the one with the big idea," Gideon reminded me. "Grace and I were only filming bald spots in the reefs for an information video to share at school. So, it's mutual."

"Looks like big ideas spark big ideas," Riley pointed out. "The same guy snapped a picture of us when we

came in a while, ago, and I reckon that ought to look good to my teachers back in Perisher about how far I'll go for a grade. To the ends of the earth!"

We all cracked up over that.

"Seriously, though, with a team like this there isn't much we couldn't handle. No matter how far into the outback we have to go. I'm thinking we could still be home by Christmas if we leave the day after tomorrow.""

"Well, as long as everybody is being serious," Gideon stood up and started pulling things out of his pockets. "Let's count up our resources and see if we have enough between us to get all the way to the outback. I'm good for about forty-three dollars cash, and some savings I can tap into."

"You brought wheels and volunteered to drive," Riley pointed out. "Those are the most important. I've been working in the family business ever since I was tall enough, so I'll foot the traveling money."

"I've got savings, too," I add.

"Now that's settled," Gideon lowered his voice as if the next thing he said was going to be a secret. "I better let you both in on what we'll be running into out there. Because we're not just going outback, we're going way outback."

"I know what's out there, already," I reminded him. "Witchetty grubs and legends. Neither of which set very well with me after what we've already been through."

That kind of stuff is what started all this in the first place.”

“It's up to us to finish it, though.” Riley looked over at me and I could see this was one of his rarer, more serious moments. “There's trouble out there--I can feel it. Mr. T and Ted might not get back unless we help them.”

“Did either of you ever stop to think they might not want to come back?” Gideon asked.

So, that was it! The biggest piece of the puzzle, so far, and suddenly everything else seemed to make sense. Ted might have been brainwashed in some way. But he didn't have a family—other than us--and maybe something had happened out there to change his mind. But Dad would never give up Mom and me, our amazing new home, and the rest of his career for one discovery. He just wouldn't. A rescue? Yes. A sacrifice? The stakes would have to be way higher than these.

Unless he had become brainwashed, too.

“Okay, so—whatever it takes—we're going to finish it!” I spoke it out like they hadn't gone on talking about something else while I was busy wrestling with all my dream logic.

Gideon had moved to the end of the table nearest Riley, and the first phrase I heard him say that registered was. “Ghost People, mate. Ghost People country is where we should head for. Ghost People are beyond

creepy, they're diabolical. Have a second cousin that spent half his life trying to help them. He might give us some pointers."

"Are they another outback aboriginal tribe, Gideon?" I ask.

"Nope!" he answers. "Definitely not. Far from it. They are the sole occupants of the most outback of all outback towns. And they don't like strangers."

"Which means just getting ourselves out there will be huge," I tell them. "We'll need to head bush-to-goodness knows where, for gosh-only-knows how long." I sigh and toss Gideon's keys I've been fiddling with back onto the table. When they hit, they splay out like a flower in all directions.

That's when I notice one of the keys is an exact replica of the one of Ted's that I still have in my pocket. "Hey, what's that for—where did you get it!" I ask him.

He looks over to see what I'm pointing to. "That? Safety box key for the closest bank to Ghost Gum Gully."

"Ghost Gum Gully!" Riley and I practically say it in unison.

"Belongs to my uncle, really. It's where he keeps the deed to a defunct opal mine and I'm his only kin. More for his peace of mind than mine, so, I keep it on me."

I reach into my pocket for the one I found in Dad's desk. "This one belong's to Ted. Except the only thing

we knew about it was it didn't fit anything in Shark Heads. They had their first forty safety boxes removed when they needed more space to put in a new walk-in safe about ten years, ago. The number on this one is fourteen."

"Must be the same place then."

"I think whatever Ted's got in his.." I closed my fingers over the key as if it had just turned to gold. "It will be something vitally important. Maybe even the reason he sent that message to Dad. Might even be something we could get them back with. Don't you think, Rye?"

"Could be. I have a feeling the land Mr. Never gave me won't be far from there, either. Especially if it's got something Ted Griffiths needs on it."

Gideon's arms slide across the table towards Riley. His right hand forms into a fist, which he uses to knock rhythmically on the table for a moment, and suddenly, their eyes lock. Nobody has to say another word to know that--like the Riley's family cabin at the base of Mount Perisher--Mr. Never's land could also be in dangerous territory.

"Maybe Ted isn't the only one who needs what's on it, mate," Gideon suggests.

"I'll find that out, too," Riley answers with that determined look he gets when there's something he is absolutely going to do, no matter what gets in the way.

Gideon smiles. “That’s all there is to it.” Then he laughs, like it’s all in the bag, and lets fly with one of those infectious deep chuckles—the kind that makes it hard for anyone not to join in. “I had a feeling you two weren’t the kind to let a little thing like running into a few Ghost People, stop you.”

Next thing, both of them are laughing, and there’s hardly anything Riley likes more than a good laugh. So, when he puts an arm around my neck and pulls me close in another sort of “Gotcha!” gesture, I can’t help laughing, too.

I’m totally maxed out on happiness—yet, at the same time—eager and confident enough to take on the whole world if the situation calls for it. Sort of fearless. Like Joan. And all of a sudden, I can see how it’s really up to me how I look at things. I can either zone in on all the bad stuff that’s been going on, or—if I make up my mind to it—I can zero in on the fact that I might actually be on the brink of the most exciting and adventurous time of my life. The direction I go is up to me.

So, Ghost People country...here we come!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shale Kenny is a fair-dinkum, true-blue Aussie who loves to bring the mysteries of her heritage Down Under to life in stories. Travel with her young Outback Heroes as they discover the wonders of the largest island in the world, where the ordinary can become extra-ordinary—and when disaster strikes—a way out can always be found.

You can connect with this fascinating author over at:

SHALEKENNY.COM

NEXT UP: **GHOST PEOPLE**

Continue the adventures of Outback Heroes Riley Williams and Joanie Thomas as they travel with their friends Grace and Gideon to Ghost Gum Gulley, Australia. It is the farthest town in the outback. A place full of witchetty grubs, legends, and Ghost People. The place where they will either find the man they are searching for or fall into the same trap.

Other Books By

Shale Kenny

The Outback Heroes Series
(Young Adult)

Book One

PERISHER

Here is the story of Riley Williams, who grew up in the shadow of Mount Perisher, in the Snowy Mountains of Australia. Nobody gets into a life or death situation on purpose. But when he tries to help a beautiful girl from the outback solve a problem that turns out to be bigger than both of them, every skill he has ever learned from the mountain is challenged. That's when he finds out that being a "true blue" Aussie hero just might be one of the hardest--nearly impossible--challenges in the world. But what he is most sure of is...they didn't name that place Perisher for nothing.

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