

Saved At Sea

*Michelle & Rachelle
Hamilton*

*DEDICATED TO THE
ONE WHOM EVEN THE
WINDS AND SEAS OBEY*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

1. *A Tonic for the Soul*
2. *Tropical Ambience*
3. *A Torrent of Wild Emotions*
4. *Collision with Destiny*
5. *In Too Deep*
6. *Extreme Revelations*
7. *Doomed to Die*
8. *The Day of Piercing Torment*
9. *Angelic Encounter*
10. *Insurmountable Odds*
11. *A Lethal Adversary*
12. *Appointed Time*
13. *Destination of Terror*
14. *The Precipice of Despair*
15. *Divine Deliverance*
16. *A Battle of Wills*
17. *The Capture of the Aussie Mermaid*
18. *A Lonely Vigil*
19. *Saved*
20. *Life or Death: The Blatant Truth*
21. *Out of the Darkness*

Epilogue

Jonah Ministries

Salvation Prayer

Scripture Jonah

A TONIC FOR THE SOUL -1

RACHELLE ... 12 P.M. SATURDAY MARCH 4 SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA.

The plane taxied down the runway, engines whining to full power. I felt the same way, emotionally charging with excitement! To my amazement, the holiday that I had organized at a moment's notice had finally come together. Here I was, strapped securely in my seat, but once again I still could not dispel the slight apprehension I felt about flying. Unbidden, three airline mishaps of the past few months came to my mind. I'd previously paid little attention to the air hostesses as they stood in the aisles demonstrating the aircraft's safety procedures, but considering the recent events, I now strained to hear the location of exits and the usual emergency routine.

My eyes followed the direction of her pointed finger, noting the exit nearest my seat. Watching the air hostess for what seemed like the hundredth time demonstrate the use of the life jacket, I wondered if it came to the crunch, would I really remember the procedure well enough to carry it out effectively? *Don't dwell on that, I told myself harshly. If your number's up, there is nothing you can do about it. Relax, sit back, and enjoy the flight.*

The jet shifted as we began our ascent. My window seat offered a breathtaking view of the magnificent panorama of my hometown. There below me were the jewels of Sydney, encompassed by the majestic splendor of the harbor. The Harbor Bridge stretched its arms of steel toward the city, while enthroned on the harbor lay the impressive Opera House. The brilliance of its creative design was a sight to behold; the vast mass of gleaming white shimmered in the bright morning sunshine. My heart swelled with pride at this, the adopted city I now called home. Surely, no other city on earth could equal its natural beauty.

The pilot's voice nudged me back from my thoughts: "We have reached our cruising altitude of twenty-five thousand feet. The weather conditions are fine, and our scheduled arrival in Singapore is at 7:35 this evening. We hope you enjoy your flight."

My daughter Michelle had sent an assortment of Boracay Island brochures to give me a taste of my holiday destination. In a whirlwind of frantic activity arranging the last-minute details, I'd skimmed hurriedly through the brochures, glancing only at the glorious colored photographs. Now with six hours at my disposal, I took them from my bag, relishing the idea of leisurely reading them. I opened one of the brochures on my lap and began to read:

BORACAY ISLAND

Serenity best describes this most endearing of tropical islands. Boracay is a tonic for the soul, owing its serenity to its physical isolation as much as anything else. About nine hundred and fifty kilometers [589 miles] south of Manila, the island is only 4 miles long and a little over one mile wide. It can only be reached by banca (a boat similar to a catamaran) from the town Caticlan, located on the southernmost tip of the

island of Panay. Boracay is a poet's haven. You'll find cabanas beautifully set into dramatic hill slopes. Or choose a cabana on the beach, so you can simply stroll through the palm trees on the powder-fine white sand down to a sliver of vibrant, almost unreal, turquoise green sea. Nature seems to have used Boracay as a model for all other tropical paradises. Mornings greet the soft, whispering waves of the sea and peer at the radiance of the green, swaying coconut palms. Evenings quietly set in with brushstrokes of exotic hues and the most stunning silhouettes of evening. Watch the sunset while you dine on sumptuous food at one of the stunning array of restaurants Boracay has to offer. Enjoy the sun, sea and soul—for this will be a holiday you'll never forget.

I poured over these brochures, enraptured. It all seemed too good to be true! I could almost feel the sand as I imagined lying on it with the heat warming my body. A lengthy period of unseasonal rain in Sydney certainly enhanced the anticipation of the island pleasures in store for me. My excitement was also heightened because I would soon see Michelle again. One year ago, my daughter had seen an advertisement in the Sydney *Morning Herald* for a tutor to teach conversational English in Tokyo. Within two weeks of applying she was accepted. In a flurry of activity Michelle left her job, obtained a visa, terminated the lease on her apartment, packed her bags, and flew away on a promising new adventure. With her hopes, dreams, and ambitions tucked firmly in her heart, she was ready for the flight into the unknown.

The timing was perfect: A two-year relationship with her American boyfriend had ended suddenly, leaving her bewildered and hurt. A change of environment seemed to be the perfect panacea for her first broken heart. Some would call her decision impetuous, but if the distance would benefit Michelle, then I encouraged the venture.

Conflicting emotions had assailed me! While a part of me urged her to take hold of her life and explore the world, another part was reluctant to see her go. Michelle's absence would leave a distinct void in our lives. For her twenty-one years we had hardly ever been separated. But I knew Michelle must follow her own destiny, and as a mother I was secretly relieved she had ended her mismatched romance.

I also envied her carefree life with no encumbrances, responsibilities, or commitments. Michelle was a free spirit. I would have loved to pack up and jet to the other side of the world as she had. Unlike her, however, I hadn't the freedom to follow my desires. My heart was full of maybes and one day's. And now, a year later, my own tropical paradise was awaiting me at the end of this flight.

"Excuse me, madam, would you prefer grilled fish or beef stroganoff?" the hostess asked. I snapped back to the present.

"Oh the fish, please." I answered. The aroma of the meal wafted toward me, and I suddenly realized I was ravenous.

Envisioning our reunion, I imagined Michelle and I would talk into the small hours of morning. We had an entire year's news to catch up on. I wondered how much she had changed. The year she had lived in Japan would undoubtedly have broadened her horizons. A small, unwanted thought crept in. Would we still retain our close relationship? She was now a grown woman, not my little

girl. Extremely adventurous by nature, Michelle's curiosity for life was boundless. Even as a child I was unable to contain her. Now I hoped she still needed me and hadn't become so worldly that her mother was disposable and obsolete!

Only ten minutes left until we arrived in Singapore. I took out my cosmetics bag and touched up my lipstick. I didn't want to look even one year older! I'd really made it! One glorious month's holiday was about to begin, and I was breathless with expectation.

My stomach was doing somersaults when the captain's voice crackled over the intercom, "We trust that you have enjoyed your flight. If you care to adjust your watches, Singapore time is now 7:40 P.M. The temperature is seventy-seven degrees and the humidity is eighty-five percent. Thank you for flying Qantas. We hope you enjoy your stay in Singapore and that you will travel with us again soon."

There certainly was a disparity between the glamorous image I portrayed and the rugged, adventure-bound bag which accompanied me. As I dragged the conspicuous bag off the luggage conveyor, its unsuspected weight caused me to drop it, nearly sending me sprawling to the floor. Fortunately for me, a man behind me caught my arm as I went down and managed to save me from making a spectacle of myself. He maneuvered the bag back onto the trolley.

I smiled gratefully and then walked forward toward a mass of brown faces staring through the huge glass window. I pushed the awkwardly heavy cart through the double doors. Michelle called excitedly from behind the metal barrier. I caught sight of her at once. Michelle's long blonde hair stood out among the crowd. My heart pounded against my chest as Michelle's arms waved furiously in the air. Happiness washed over me, and I couldn't wait to hold her again. I couldn't contain myself any longer! Abandoning the trolley, I rushed to meet her, our arms encircling each other. Tears of pure joy released themselves unchecked as we held each other for what seemed like an eternity.

Tears of joy threatened to flow down my cheeks. ***Oh no***, I thought, ***there goes my make-up***. I wanted to rush over and hold her immediately, but I had to be cleared by customs first. I must have an honest face, for he waved me through without question.

Standing back at an arm's length, we appraised each other, laughing through our tears. A fresh wave of emotion swept over us as we hugged and kissed all over again. I took a long look at her: It seemed incredible that this strikingly beautiful young woman before me was my daughter. Her long golden hair flowed down her back, curling at the ends. She appeared to be taller than I'd remembered, a little over five feet, six inches tall. Her skin glowed with a healthy tan, acquired, no doubt, on some exotic island.

Michelle beamed me a self-conscious smile, for she knew that I was appraising her. The color of her fiery green eyes reflected her passionate zest for life. But more than this, they radiated an intelligence and sense of humor. Her natural, spontaneous generosity was born out of her genuine, humanitarian heart. The air around her seemed to crackle with



raw vitality; she possessed the spirit of an Arabian thoroughbred, galloping fearlessly through life with carefree abandon. Michelle displayed the willfulness of a self-determined individual, impetuously snatching all that life had to offer without a moment's reflection. And she was my daughter. My heart swelled with a mother's pride. It didn't seem possible that this was the same little girl who once had red-rib boned ponytails and missing front teeth. The duckling had been transformed into a beautiful swan. With arms linked, we made our way out of Singapore's Changi Airport,

about to embark on the holiday of a lifetime—one I hoped would be so memorable that I'd delight in telling my grandchildren about it many years from now.

TROPICAL AMBIENCE -2

MICHELLE ... 7:30 A.M. THURSDAY, MARCH 9 BORACAY ISLAND.

The morning sun danced playfully on the ripples of the shimmering ocean. I waded languidly through the crystal-clear sea, occasionally kicking water into the air with carefree abandon. Dreamily soaking in the landscape, I came to the only conclusion possible: Boracay Island was idyllic! The ivory sand felt as soft as baby powder between my toes, as a multitude of squeaky grains massaged the soles of my feet. The stunning colors of the ocean were breathtaking. Like an artist's brushstrokes on a canvas, the shades changed from a brilliant turquoise green, blending into an aqua, and finally merging into a deep midnight blue. Palm trees stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the morning sky. I stood there in awe of such natural beauty.

The ocean had an almost mystical aura, and I found it an endless pleasure to observe its ever-changing moods. At times it was a tranquil, velvety carpet of water, but at others a different face appeared, that of a powerful, unpredictable force. The ocean was a tonic for my soul, a place I headed for quiet contemplation and solace. It represented the enjoyment of hot summer days, tanning under the tropical sun. Memories of treasured childhood days surfaced, of bare-bottomed children playing blissfully under the sun; of colorful beach balls, sand pails, and shovels; of melting ice cream cones and long cool drinks.

Ahhh, another perfect day in paradise, I thought. *What splendid conditions for sailing around the island*. I'd been waiting the last couple of days to attempt this adventurous challenge, but strong winds had prevented me from doing so. The weather conditions today, however, proved more suitable, with a slight sea breeze bringing relief from the already sultry heat.

Strolling back to our beachfront bungalow, I hoped Mum would be as enthusiastic as I was about the adventurous day I'd planned for us. I glanced at my watch before entering the bungalow. Ten past eight, an acceptable hour to wake Mum. No self-respecting person should still be sleeping on such a wonderful day, even if she were on holiday. I quietly opened the door. The mosquito net was still draped, overhanging the bed. It reminded me of an exotic movie I'd seen as a child, set in Africa.

"Good morning. It's time you were up and about. It is a beautiful day," I said, breezing into the bungalow. "It's a superb day for sailing around the island. Do you feel up to it?"

"That sounds good!" Mum responded, shaking herself from sleep. "Let me take a shower and get dressed. Why don't you order us a cup of coffee and find out the situation on hiring a boat."

"Okay, sounds great to me." I agreed, heading out the door.

Upon entering the restaurant, I approached a Filipino waiter. "Excuse me; I believe you have some boats for hire?"

"Not me, ma'am, my boss," he said with a smile. "You'll have to speak to him, okay? I'll get him to come and talk to you at your bungalow."

"No problem," I assured him.

With that settled I ordered our coffee and returned to the bungalow to begin dressing appropriately for the day. Rummaging through my backpack, I selected my blue and white

striped bikini, blue shorts with a tropical design, and my favorite Ken Done cotton T-shirt. I also slipped on my black track shoes for a possible jungle trek on the other side of the island.

The Filipino waiter soon appeared with a silver tray bearing our morning coffee. He looked more suited to be serving on an elegant ocean liner, rather than at our Boracay beach cabana. Although finding it absurdly comical, we appreciated the gesture. He courteously placed the tray on the cane wicker table on the balcony, smiled shyly, then left. It was an unaccustomed pleasure to be sitting on the balcony of a beachfront bungalow, leisurely sipping our freshly brewed coffee, contemplating the enjoyable pursuits we would indulge ourselves in today.

I felt a warm satisfaction, watching the tension fall away from Mum like an unwanted winter overcoat. In the three days that we had been here, she was being wooed by the summer sun, the tropical atmosphere seducing her into a relaxed holiday mood. What an enormous relief! Mum represented a solid rock, an anchor for our close family of three girls. Usually she was a powerhouse of vital energy, endowed with an indestructible resilience, someone to marvel at in a mundane world. Her understanding of human nature penetrated the deepest aspects of people's hearts and minds. Her dynamic personality and continual enthusiasm, often in the face of insurmountable problems, intrigued me. Mum flatly refused to be beaten.

Wisps of sadness touched my heart, and I felt a tremor of childhood fear. In my mind I'd always believed that Mum was invincible, destined for eternal youthfulness and health. I'd always reassured myself of this without question. These past few days had scared me to see her so weary. She was now temporarily crushed under a barrage of unfavorable conditions, her fighting spirit reduced under an onslaught of pressures. Under normal circumstances, she would have laughed in the face of obstacles, accepting the opportunity to display her versatility and inventiveness.

However, reoccurring minor illnesses during the last year— brought on by the stress of raising a family alone and the pace of city. City life had taken its toll and, frankly, it worried me more than I was willing to believe or accept. Mum, I realized with mild shock, was not as indestructible or infallible as I had naively believed as a child. For the first time I recognized this fact, as one adult to another, not as child to parent. A veil was removed from my perception; in a flash of reality her true vulnerability as a human being was revealed. I glanced over at Mum sipping her coffee. With a hopeful heart I could see the tranquility of Boracay doing its work. In only a few short days since we arrived, Mum was being transformed back into the sparkling person I always knew her to be.

Her appearance was somewhat deceptive, and we dumbfounded many when they discovered we were mother and daughter. In fact, on several occasions some people absolutely refused to believe it. An abundance of thick blonde hair hung softly around her shoulders. She possessed chameleon-like eyes, which changed color mirroring her mood. In a state of high spirits her eyes reflected a shade of pale green, altering to the soft grey of a winter sky in her more reflective, gentle moods. Captivating good looks and naturally flowing confidence endeared her to almost everybody she met. A glowing, unblemished complexion, encompassing high cheekbones, helped her retain a youthful appearance.

The letters and CD's I'd received from her during the year I was away in Japan were mostly disheartening. Judging by them, it was obvious she was overworked and stretched to the limit. Maintaining a pressured position with a major newspaper, as well as managing a home singlehandedly, had taken its toll. Since Mum's divorce, she had solely supported my two teenage sisters, financially and otherwise.

To be honest, I was becoming increasingly concerned about her health and well-being. She was finding it more difficult to cope with increasing daily pressures. This threatened the entire family's security, which Mum had always provided in loving abundance. During the past year, she had been plagued with bouts of ill health, no doubt aggravated by the strain of overwhelming responsibilities she carried. Every letter I received proved the situation was worsening. At one stage, I was even seriously considering cutting my assignment short and returning home to Sydney, but in a sudden twist of destiny our problem was solved. Miraculously, a door was opened and an answer revealed.

I was preparing to fly to the Philippines when at the last minute, due to unforeseen circumstances; my travelling companion had to cancel our arrangements. She offered me her prepaid ticket, which could not be refunded. I immediately thought of Mum! The turn of events seemed more than just a coincidence. I intuitively felt destiny was intervening. This would alleviate Mum from the pressures of her treadmill existence.



One month in the Philippines, relaxing on a tropical island, would be the perfect tonic for her to regain her health and rejuvenate her spirit. Shaking with nervous excitement, I called her from Bangkok. Surprisingly, Mum was able to make it, and we met in Singapore ten days later!

We had a special relationship and shared many interests. I was born when Mum was only nineteen, so the generation gap barely applied. We always were friends in the true sense of the word. Now, after this month's holiday, I felt sure she would find a renewed vitality and zest for life once more. And we would both enjoy our time together.

Incredibly, here we *were fete accompli*, sitting on the balcony of our beachfront bungalow on gorgeous Boracay Island, leisurely sipping our morning cup of coffee, in the most heavenly surroundings. And we had an entire month of this.

With a burst of enthusiasm I began telling Mum what the day's plans were: "It's going to be great. Perhaps we can sail around to the other side. The entire island is only about four miles long, so it shouldn't be too strenuous for you. When we get around there, we can sun bake, do a little snorkeling, and have a picnic. David mentioned that there are even some caves we can explore. It will be fun. What do you think? Are you game?" I questioned.

"Absolutely," she said, although I sensed a little reluctance in her voice. I knew Mum wasn't that keen on the ocean, unless of course, she was on a luxurious boat. But her slight reticence did not deter me; I was determined to sail around the island anyway and have a wonderful day.

"Excuse me ma'am," said a man, interrupting our conversation. "You want to hire a bunca?"

"Oh, yes, do you have one for rent?"

"We have two. Do you want to see them?"

"Definitely! C'mon, Mum," I insisted, guiding her by the arm in a flurry of excitement. Willy Gelito, the owner of Willy's Beachfront Cottages, escorted us down to the water's edge.

"Here we are," he said, pointing to a thirteen-foot pink sailboat. "How many people will be on the boat?"

"Oh, just the two of us," I said lamely. I immediately sensed his apprehension at letting two females take out his sailboat.

"Can you sail a boat?"

"Well, Mum can. She belongs to a yacht club at home."

He raised his eyebrow quizzically. His dubious tone of voice sounded an alarm in me. *Well, I conceded mentally, the boat does look a little large for us to handle.*

Determined not to abandon the idea completely, I asked him: "Excuse me; you said you had another boat. Perhaps that would be smaller and more suitable?"

He pointed to a little crassly painted canoe with outriggers, lying abandoned on the sand. It couldn't have been longer than seven feet. I almost started to laugh but decided against it.

"But it has no sail!" I exclaimed.

He motioned toward two oars. "It is a bunca. You paddle it," he instructed. "Where do you intend going?"



"Oh, just around." I dared not tell him we were planning to take it around to the other side of the island. He might refuse to hire it, and I was desperate not to have my plans thwarted. Once I set my mind to something, my stubborn streak of determination would not be swayed by opinion or logic—not always a positive trait, but it did have its advantages!

"The boat is one hundred and fifty pesos for the day. Do you want it?" he shrugged.

"Shall we go for it, Mum? It is a little primitive, but what the heck, it will probably be fun," she nodded.

"Okay, we'll take it. I'll just go and get some money and my bag and be back in a minute."

We walked back to the bungalow. I hurriedly began stuffing the necessary items into my cotton string bag: two walkmans, a selection of tapes, two sarongs, a camera, reading material, snorkel, flippers, and mask.

Rattling off the items as I came out the door, I asked Mum, "Can you think of anything else?"

"No, I think we've pretty well covered it, except maybe it would be a good idea to get a bottle of water and a few mangoes to take with us."

"Good thinking. I'll pick them up from the restaurant when I pay for the bunca. If you're ready, then let's go."

I loved pitting my skills against the elements; it exhilarated me. Paddling around the island would enable me to fulfill an exciting challenge. Sliding my money belt around my waist, I securely locked the door behind us and ran enthusiastically toward our little rented rowboat.

In my exuberant mood, little did I know that this would be the last time I'd ever set foot on Boracay Island again.

A TORRENT OF WILD EMOTIONS – 3

RACHELLE ... 9 A.M. THURSDAY MARCH 9 BORACAY ISLAND.

The crystal-clear water of the sea intrigued me. A school of electric blue and yellow fish darted directly beneath the canoe. I welcomed the distraction from the rising nausea I was feeling, due to the incessant bobbing of the canoe. Unable to resist, I dipped my hand into the soft, warm, and inviting water. I watched as the water parted at my cupped hand, leaving a ripple behind me.

Farther below us, I observed swaying branches of seaweed flowing with the currents. Multi-colored coral adorned the rocks below, camouflage for a multitude of sea life which lived off the reef. Floating on the top of the ocean was one thing but being able to witness firsthand the teeming unseen world beneath the surface was another. Completely captivated by the window into that world, I forgot that five minutes earlier I'd wanted to go back to shore.

My stomach, however, was not having such a good time. Suppressing the queasy sensation, I tried to focus my attention on a huge dark patch looming ahead of us. Far below, I could see the sun's rays penetrating the depths. Plant life lifted up foliage to absorb the light. Now we were almost directly over the large reef which was just about eight feet below the surface. The rock appeared dark and ominous; then a large reef fish emerged from between the weeds.

"Look, Michelle, over there. Can you see him coming from between the weeds?" I asked excitedly as I pointed in the direction of the fish.

"Hey, he's a beauty. I'd love to put on my snorkel gear and go take a closer look."

"Please, don't. It makes me so nervous. Stay in the boat. Besides, we can see more from this perspective anyway."

"But, Mum, it's not the same as being under the sea and actually entering into their world."

"Maybe so, but just the thought of you under there has already made my hair stand on end. Wait till you get back and then you can snorkel around the rocks closer to the shore. We're out quite deep now!"

We had been paddling for approximately an hour now, and it was becoming increasingly more difficult to move against the current. The muscles in my arms were strained. Now I understood why the bunca came equipped with a small plastic bailer; it was continually filling with water. With only about six inches of free board, the bunca offered an open invitation for the sea to lap into the canoe, which it did with increasing regularity. For some unexplainable reason my mood had changed from enjoyment to anxiety. My eyes anxiously sought the shore; we had paddled out too far for my comfort. My stomach began fluttering nervously. Suddenly I wanted to be back on dry ground.

"Michelle, could you please take me back now? I've had enough. The water has turned too choppy for my liking and I'm feeling a bit nauseous. I'm really sorry. I don't mean to spoil your day."

"Oh, Mum, don't be such a wimp. You said you wanted to come. Now where's your sense of adventure?"

"Deserted me, I'm afraid. I've experienced all I want to for one day. You know how nervous I am on the ocean. I think it was great of me even to venture out at all in this toy boat, which in my opinion is more suited to a backyard swimming pool."

"Okay, then," Michelle agreed reluctantly, the disappointment clearly showing on her face.

Extremely relieved, I dipped the oars into the sea, paddling strongly until the depth of the water was almost shallow enough for me to stand up. The pounding of my heart had subsided. I was grateful to be back within my own depth. I enjoyed the ocean—to look at, admire, pay homage to its awesome power, or take in its waters on a hot summer day—but that's about as far as it went with me. There were so many unseen dangers lurking beneath its surface. I'd had more than enough trouble dealing with everyday threats, let alone flaunting unnecessary danger. After seeing the Spielberg movie *Jaws*, I had been haunted by nightmares for days, not that I was any water baby before!

Standing up in the seven-foot bunca, I precariously balanced myself as I prepared to jump out. Bending down, I placed my hands on each side of the canoe, leaning my full weight on them, trying not to tip it over as I lifted up my right leg and placed it down onto the sandy bottom of the shallow water. Transferring my weight to the stable leg, I then lifted my other leg out of the canoe.

"Wonderful," I said, as I planted both feet on solid ground.

"Here's the key to the bungalow, Mum. What will you do for the rest of the afternoon?"

"I'll probably relax in the hammock and read for awhile. Michelle, I think you should come in as well. The water's not as calm as it was earlier on."

"Mum, I'm twenty-two years old. I've managed an entire year in Japan on my own, so I'm sure I can handle a day's outing in this child's canoe."

I gave up trying to convince her, realizing she was determined to have her own way. I relented only with a warning: "Please, Michelle, don't go out too far, will you?"

"No, I won't. See you later. Have fun."

Wading into the shore, I turned around to watch her glide off happily, singing as she paddled in time to the music. Oh, well, she's happy. The young always have so much stamina. They seem fearless! Maybe they believe in their own immortality. I was suddenly confronted with a sense of loss for my own youth. I pondered for a moment. At what age did fear replace daring? At one time, not so long ago, I would have felt cheated to have missed out on any action. Now I was content watching my children greedily devouring great chunks of life for themselves.

Dragging my big toes in the sand and leaving a trail behind me, I sauntered up the beach to our bungalow in a reflective mood. The day had become hot and sultry. Walking the twenty yards to the restaurant, I relished the thought of an ice-cold mango shake. Mangoes, ice cream, yogurt, milk, and ice blended together made a refreshing drink. My thirst prompted me to order two, which would last through the afternoon. Carrying them back to the bungalow, I noticed with some amazement that I had almost demolished one on the way.

Collecting the walkman and a selection of choice classical tapes, my half-read novel, and the remains of the mango shakes, I settled into the hammock, anticipating a deliciously seductive afternoon. Opening my book, I endeavored to read, but my mind kept wandering off. After several attempts to get into the novel, I gave up and succumbed to the afternoon delights. To Chopin's Minute Waltz in D-flat Major, I swayed gently to and fro, gazing up at the fluffy cumulus clouds as they drifted across the magnificent blue South Sea sky. My thoughts were fleeting and scattered; I couldn't concentrate on any one subject for more than a moment. *What the heck, I don't have a care in the world*, I reflected. My lost youth, the regrettable past, the unknown future, the children's welfare—at this moment they were all far from me.

Staring out to sea, my attention was captured by a solitary windsurfer. The shocking pink and lime green sails assaulted the horizon. I was held transfixed as the board skimmed across the surface, at one stage almost becoming airborne. The rider seemed very competent as he maneuvered it through the choppy waters. Instantly, I was aware that the sea had become quite a bit rougher, the glassy surface of the morning now gone. The wind had stirred up small churning waves. Michelle—in that little boat—came to the forefront of my mind, and uneasiness crept through me.

Grabbing my sarong from the balcony railing, I tied it securely around me as I walked briskly towards the shoreline. From where I stood, the palm trees blocked my view of the other end of the beach. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I scanned the foreshore. I breathed a sigh of relief as I sighted her about five hundred feet down the island, paddling close to the shore. Thank goodness, she'd taken my advice for a change. I resumed my luxurious position in the hammock, and, to the emotionally charged melodies from the pen of Chopin, I drifted into a pleasurable afternoon siesta.

Awakening some time later, I felt cramped and stiff. Beads of perspiration trickled down my back and forehead. Where my head had fallen forward onto my chest was now sticky. Yuk! A dip in the cooling ocean was the remedy. Snatching a towel, I ran down to the sea, dropping it onto the sand as I went. Without hesitation, I plunged into the surf, dunking right under for maximum relief. Ahh! That felt good. Refreshed, I stood up, squeezing the excess water from my hair.

As I did this, I noticed there were only a few people left on the beach. Long, early evening shadows streaked the sand. Whirling around, I looked at the sun. It was low in the sky. For goodness sake, it would soon be dusk. How long had I been asleep? Clearing the salt water from my eyes, I once again peered down the southern end of the beach. By this time, I was sure I would see Michelle paddling her way home, but there was no sign of her. With a quickened step, I returned to the bungalow, dried off, and slipped on a cotton dress.

Locking the door behind me, I made my way down to the beach, hoping to meet up with her coming home. I took long, purposeful strides, my step quickening as I kept my eyes glued to the water's edge. I glanced at the molten sun as it descended in the glowing sky. Ripples of fear played up and down my spine. Though subtle, they nevertheless were early warning signs of my growing apprehension.

I strained to see what looked to be her bunca appearing from behind a rock about three hundred feet out. Was there one person or two in that bunca? I broke into a run, now needing action to deter the rising trepidation which threatened to take hold of me. No, there were two people in there. Maybe she had taken someone on board for company? As it drew closer, my hopes were dashed. The person in the boat wore a bright yellow T-shirt. Definitely not Michelle! From this vantage point, I was now able to see to the end of the point clearly. I wasn't mistaken; the sea was deserted!

Be calm, I told myself forcefully as I broke into a run. Retracing my steps up the beach, I now transferred my hopes to the possibility that she may have already arrived home, having approached the bungalow from another direction. Breathless from the exertion, I kept up my pace until our bungalow was in view. My heart was thudding hard against my chest, although thoughts of my own discomfort were not a consideration. With every step I prayed, *Please be home, Michelle. . . . Please, be home!*

I stood staring at the vacant space where only this morning we had carried the bunca down to the water. Rooted to the spot, my mind searched desperately for another valid reason as to why she was not home. A reasonably logical answer came to my mind: She could have beached the boat at another place. Not yet recovering my breath, I forced myself to keep on looking.

Now my attention was focused on the chance that Michelle might have changed course during the afternoon and headed for the floating restaurant at the opposite end of the point from where I had been searching. Yes, that's it, I convinced myself with renewed hope. She's gone to visit David and the crowd we had met several days before. Halfway towards my destination, I met David on the beach.

"David, have you seen Michelle?" I asked, gasping out the words through a parched mouth.

"No, not today. Why?"

"Oh, my God, David, she took out a bunca for the day and hasn't come back yet."

"Sit down for a minute and catch your breath. Now tell me exactly what has happened, Rachelle." He was calm as he took my arm and led me to a chair.

"We went out in a hired bunca this morning, planning to go around to the other side of the island," I explained. "After an hour or so, I'd had enough, so Michelle dropped me back on the beach and paddled off. She hasn't come back yet!"



"When did you see her last?"

"Around ten thirty—no, hang on, I saw her again at about eleven thirty," I said, with a tremor in my voice. "But it's almost dark, and I obviously expected her before now. There is no sight of her anywhere."

"Don't upset yourself, Rachelle. I think you're jumping the gun," David reassured me.

"From what I know of Michelle, she seems a very capable young lady. I'll bet she's relaxing on another beach

enjoying a cocktail while you are frantically worrying yourself for nothing."

"No, David, I know Michelle better than you. She wouldn't stay out like that. Even if she had been caught by the current and couldn't get back to this side of the island, she would have walked overland. It is not that far, you know. We were over there yesterday horseback riding, so she knew the way. Besides, I've been right down to the southernmost point. I would have seen her boat dragged up on the beach."

"Look, if it would make you feel better, I'll ask John if we could take his boat out to look for her. But I'm sure you're underestimating her. I bet she'll turn up large as life and wonder what all the fuss is about."

His reassuring confidence in Michelle's capabilities alleviated the rising panic in me. I desperately needed to be convinced that he was right. Call it mother's intuition, but I inwardly sensed I would not find Michelle on the island. I didn't want to accept this primal information, let alone allow it to take root. David, John, and I soon headed the forty-foot schooner out to sea. The skies were already getting stormy. The churning machinery of the motor drowned out the whistling sounds of the strong sea breeze. We rounded the corner where the island tipped into the Pacific Ocean, where I'd last seen Michelle heading.

I called out into the growing blackness of the night sea, "Michelle . . . Michelle." I called with my ears straining and my face contorted with concentration. We waited but silence reigned; my pleading calls went unanswered.

"Rachelle, we'll have to turn back now," David gently told me. "It's too dark to see anything. I doubt she'll be out here anyway. I bet she'll be waiting for you back at the bungalow."

I smiled weakly, trying to summon up enough courage to believe the possibility of his suggestion. Turning the boat around, we headed back to its mooring. There was still a chance Michelle had slipped through my search and would be waiting for me, and I clung desperately to that thought. With supreme effort I suppressed the strangling lump in my throat which constricted my every breath. I shook uncontrollably! We steered into the berth. Even before the boat had moored properly, I leapt off into the knee-deep water. I possessed one single thought: to get to the bungalow and end this excruciating uncertainty.

She had to be there! My faith was running out of possibilities; this was the last plausible one. If she wasn't home, then there could only be one conclusion—she was out in that ocean. No, I wouldn't accept that. She had to be home! Running along the dark deserted beach alone, I picked my way between the scattered rocks and trees, thankful that the moon gave enough light for me to move quickly. Looking up into the vast open sky, I pleaded with a desperation I'd never known. ***Dear God, please let her be home, please. This is too much for me to bear,*** I prayed.

An impenetrable wall of reality confronted me. She had not come home! The last threads of hope cementing me together caved in. I sunk to my knees in the sand, letting out a tormented howl from the very depths of my being.

COLLISION WITH DESTINY - 4

MICHELLE ... 10:30am THURSDAY, MARCH 9, BORACAY ISLAND.

The oars cut through the iridescent surface of the water with powerful precision. First one side, then the other. The bunca sliced effortlessly through the slightly buffeting waves. Just as I congratulated myself on mastering the technique of rowing, I tilted the oar the wrong way, managing to drench myself with an unwelcome spray of salty water. Well, that certainly doused my self-confidence!



Clad only in my bikini and shorts, I felt the sun beating down on my bare back. My skin felt invigorated by the heat of the sun's rays. Today was going to be a scorcher! My object of focus was the craggy, southernmost tip of the island. I had to maneuver the bunca around the tip if I wanted to get around to the other side.

Putting on my headphones, I pushed the play button and turned the volume up to maximum. There was a momentary silence; then the raw, hard hitting voice of my favorite rock music came pounding through the earphones. The rhythm was contagious, and I began rowing in time to the intoxicating beat. Initially, I had been annoyed with Mum for giving up so early, but now that she had, I was secretly pleased. I was free to do what I wanted and unleash my unmelodious voice as loud as I liked, and no one would hear me, except some flying fish or a stray seagull. I was enjoying my solitude immensely, feeling as light and free as a summer breeze. I marveled at my exquisite surroundings; the clear blue sky was only interrupted by wisps of white cloud breaking up the monotony.

I glanced over at the island, where waves of sweltering heat turned the entire island into a shimmering mirage. Swimmers and sun lovers adorned the ivory white strip of beach, giving it a flamboyant splash of color. A burning sensation began to well up in the muscles of my arms. What an exhilarating feeling it was to push your body to the limits. At this rate I wouldn't have to work out today!

Once again, I focused my attention on the tip of the island to see how I was progressing. Although I'd been rowing strenuously for quite some time, it registered with some surprise that I didn't appear to be getting any closer, hi fact, I had the distinct feeling I was moving even further away from the shore. Maybe my perspective was a little deceiving as I was now parallel with the tip, although still quite a way out. I didn't seem to be able to maneuver the boat around it, and I couldn't understand why.

I reached into my bag and selected another album to play and continued to row. This was undoubtedly proving to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Oh well, I wanted a challenge, and now I certainly had one. What the heck, the sun was shining; I was listening to my favorite music and holidaying on one of the world's most beautiful islands. So what if it wasn't all smooth sailing!

Through my headphones came the song from U2, I still haven't found what I'm looking for. As I began singing along to the chorus, a question entered my head with the forcefulness of a piercing arrow. 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'. As I mulled that thought over I realized the very truth of it, I still had not found what I was looking for. In fact I did not even know what I was looking for exactly. What I knew for sure was that in my career, having a boyfriend, travelling the world and having exciting adventures, drinking, partying and doing whatever I wanted had not brought me the satisfaction I desired. I still felt empty and filled with a yearning need to find what it was I was looking for. Perhaps this year would be my quest in finding that elusive missing piece of the puzzle.

With renewed vigor I began paddling harder, determined to make it around the point. To my left, I noticed the approach of a brightly-colored fishing boat which passed quite close to me. Several of the fishermen waved cheerfully to me. I detected questioning looks on their faces and wondered if I appeared strange to them in some way. I couldn't understand why they were staring at me with such quizzical expressions. I glanced down to check if my bikini top had fallen off. No, everything was still in place. Possibly a blonde girl rowing on her own so far out was an unfamiliar sight. Oh well, I was becoming accustomed to the locals looking bewildered at everything we tourists did. They really do think we're crazy, especially sun baking. The idea of lying in the hot sun to get brown utterly confused them.

Sometime later, I was struck by a disturbing realization. I had become so absorbed in my music and the laborious task of rowing that, unaware, I had drifted out a lot further than I intended. Underlying ripples of fear rose to the surface. I shook them off. Although I was now in deep water, literally, I still hated to give up so easily. However, it was blatantly obvious even to me now that there was no physical way I was going to paddle this piddly little boat around the point. *Why continue this impossible mission?* I thought. *No, I'm going to call it a day.* I glanced at my watch; it was 1 P.M. Great, if I make good time I'd get back to the floating cocktail bar in time for a liquid lunch. Turning the boat around with a new purpose in mind, I headed back in the direction I'd come from.

Suddenly I was excited about the prospect of meeting David while I was there. I'd met him over breakfast the first morning we had arrived on Boracay. Striking up a conversation together, we discovered we had an amazing rapport and much in common. David was 26

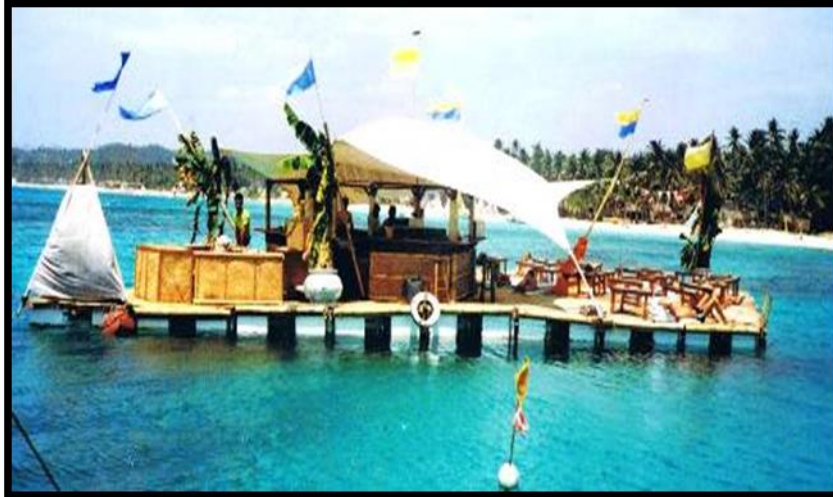


and was from America. He was typical of the men I liked; an open face with warm and friendly eyes. Generous lips, beautiful teeth and a captivating smile. Shoulder length dark blonde hair completed his Californian beach boy look. He was quite a bit taller than me at 6 feet 2 and his toned and bronzed physique was very appealing. Just being around him made me feel like a silly school girl on the inside, but outwardly I continued to project cool confidence and only mild interest.

David had invited Mum and me on his friend's luxury cruiser for a day's outing. We planned to cruise around the island, but instead we got no

more than fifty yards out to sea, only to tie up to the floating cocktail bar. Not surprisingly, we ended up spending a glorious day, drinking fabulous fruit and other exotic cocktails, and basking in the heat of the tropical sun. Located approximately fifty yards from shore, the

floating cocktail bar was the most ingenious idea I had ever seen. Made entirely of bamboo, it was about ten feet squared in an octagonal shape, kept adrift by polystyrene floats anchoring it firmly in place. Its unique aspect was its ability to be moved to different locations along the shoreline. The bamboo slats on the floor had been polished until smooth, and in its center stood the cocktail bar with stools surrounding it.



At the other end, casual chairs, cushions, and lounge chairs lay scattered around. Skimpily clad people from a variety of countries lazed casually under the tropical sun. A huge white tarpaulin sheltered the bar, offering a great escape when one got too hot. Alternatively, one could just roll off the side into the crystal-clear water to cool off.

This was the ultimate in self-indulgence, a simply fabulous way to spend a lazy afternoon in paradise. I began to feel my nose sizzling as well; I knew I should put some zinc on it, but the last thing I wanted was David seeing me with a fluorescent green nose. I decided a smearing of SPF 4 would have to suffice. After spending the last few months in Southeast Asia at several of its island resorts, I was fully aware of the damaging effects of the tropical sun. With the increased awareness of skin cancer in recent years, I had become more protective of my skin than ever before.

Now that that was taken care of, I returned to the job of maneuvering the bunca in the direction I wanted it to go. Easier said than done though! Tremors of concern again nudged at the corners of my mind. I ignored them, not wishing to acknowledge the truth—that I had drifted out recklessly far. *But no worries*, I reassured myself. *I'll alter course and cut across the bay diagonally.*

One thing I knew: I was making headway as I was now parallel to the jagged rock formation I had sun baked next to yesterday. Great, that meant I was virtually opposite our bungalow. *I wonder if Mum is still out there sun baking.* Straining my eyes, I scanned the beach, but she was nowhere to be seen! *Oh well, I'll catch up with her later.*

I wondered if I should paddle the boat in and return it now; then I could walk the rest of the way on the white beach. No, that would mean I'd have to swim the fifty yards out to the floating bar. Forget that, I'd arrive looking like a drowned rat. Now, was that any way to impress David? Absolutely not! *It's not that much further*, I reasoned. *I might as well row the rest of the way up there and besides, then I can tie the bunca up to the floating bar.* Now that I'd decided, the slight uneasiness I'd momentarily felt ceased.

A gnawing sensation in the pit of my stomach reminded me how hungry I was. I'd accidentally skipped breakfast in my enthusiasm to get an early start. Soon mental pictures of my favorite foods filled my mind. My euphoric, light-hearted feeling instantly shattered. My heart began to beat faster! What on earth was happening? Why am I not getting closer to the floating bar? Although I was now opposite the bar, I must still be at least fifty yards out.

What can I do? Should I wave or call out? I wondered. I wanted someone to know I was having some difficulty in paddling the bunca back to shore. Judging by the distance, however, I was painfully aware that I was well out of earshot, and the shoreline was receding at an alarming rate. People were now just colorful dabs on the beach. Flashing warning signs beeped on and off in my mind, signaling danger. I knew I was in trouble! Ripping out my earphones, I threw the walkman into my bag. I had to get serious! *Now Michelle, get a grip on yourself - Don't panic! You've got to think logically,* I told myself.

I had to change my strategy to know that I was making progress. I decided to set a closer goal for myself, so I searched for a reference point. Up ahead was a dark patch of coral which stood out in the otherwise transparent water. I made this my target. While I paddled furiously towards it, my attention was focused solely on this point. As I glanced into the waters surrounding me, the wind whipped up a series of hostile little waves which I had to row against. This did not, however, obstruct my clear view of the sea floor. It was a frighteningly long way down! The remaining shreds of confidence in my ability to get this situation under control were diminishing. With every unnerving discovery, I was faced with the alarming truth of my predicament.

The bunca glided over the dark patch of coral I had focused on. Now as I looked around me, bewildered, the sea was a maze of reefs. I couldn't be sure whether this was the reef I had been aiming for or not. I set another goal which was a reef about thirty-feet was ahead. I was afraid my underlying suspicions might be true, that in fact I was drifting farther out to sea. Gripping the oar tightly with both hands, I began paddling furiously. The oar sliced through the water with every determined stroke. My concentration was intense!

I found the once enchanting sea that now surrounded me very frightening. The surface of the water was choppy, although beneath it I could still sense the tranquility of this magical underwater world. In any other circumstances this would have been a breathtaking spectacle; however, this serene world now represented a dangerous threat to me.

I was suddenly hypnotized by a giant grey stingray, his huge wings oscillating, propelling him through the water. Overcome by a sickening fear, I was so relieved to be in the safety of the bunca, protected from these fearsome creatures. I hoped that a wave wouldn't tip my fragile boat over, tossing me into the sea teeming with menacing danger. The mere thought of it petrified me!

I longed to put down the oars and rest my aching arms. The tedious task of paddling was beginning to irritate me. I was tired, hungry, and ready to be home! I was even prepared to suffer the embarrassment of signaling for assistance and being towed to shore. I could just picture it: wouldn't I be hassled by the guys? Intrepid Michelle would have to admit that the

adventure turned out to be a failure. Well, I was saved from that indignity as there was not a boat in sight. But now I was faced with an even more daunting prospect: how was I going to get back to shore?

The next fifteen minutes were spent in the repetitive action of focusing on a reef and making a beeline towards it. This was the only way I could ascertain whether I was making any progress toward the shore. But how much longer could I go on pretending that everything was okay? I threw down my oars in frustration. Was this the reef I was targeting or not? I couldn't be sure. Looking about me in bewilderment, I noticed all the surrounding reefs were almost identical. How could I distinguish one from the other?

Suddenly, like a ton of bricks, the seriousness of my situation hit me. How on earth was I going to get out of this mess? What were my options? I could scream, but would anyone hear me? I doubted it. If I waved my T-shirt, was there any possibility of anyone seeing me? I doubted it! My chances of being picked up by another boat were slim, considering the last boat I had seen was about four hours ago. After eliminating all possible sources of help, it was obvious that I had gotten myself into this and it was up to me to get myself out of it. But how?

Engrossed in my thoughts, I suddenly became aware that I was moving at an alarming speed straight out to sea! I was horrified by the distance I had traveled in a matter of only minutes. All the ground I had succeeded in covering by my persistent paddling had been in vain. Panic-stricken, I couldn't think straight! My entire system froze with indecision. *Get a grip on yourself, Michelle. Every second lost in thought is ground you'll have to make up.*

Powerfully striking the water with the oars, I propelled myself forward. With every stroke, I was now in direct opposition to the strong current. After about fifteen minutes of this all-consuming effort, I was physically exhausted. I had to rest, even if it was just for a minute. A searing heat burned deep into the muscles of my arms as waves of excruciating pain tore at my limbs. Never had I experienced pain as intense. I drew a long, deep breath to slow down the wild pounding of my heart.

I watched in horror as the bunca again began moving swiftly back out to sea. I had to resume paddling; there was no other choice! I was brutally tired, but I picked up the oars with resignation. As I clenched my fists tightly around the oars in a vise-like grip, the whites of my knuckles stood out. The friction of the splintered wooden oars against the soft palms of my hands had shredded them raw. I was in agony! I summoned all my inner strength to suppress the torrent of emotions threatening to consume me. To keep control of my emotions was imperative. I felt as if I were on a tightrope of acute tension, too scared to cry or feel any self-pity.

The setting sun in the early evening sky had turned from primrose to flaming orange, indicating precious daylight hours were dwindling. The time was 4:17 P.M., only one and a half hours before darkness. Could I get back to Boracay by then? It suddenly seemed a very long way away. After paddling nonstop for five and a half hours, I was agonizingly tired.

I watched the shoreline receding; the only thing visible now was a slither of white sand. The horrific truth of my predicament struck me in a fresh wave of shock. I berated myself for such incredible stupidity. How had I let this situation get so out of hand, let it escalate to such life-threatening proportions? I felt so angry at myself, knowing I should have paddled the boat straight into shore at the first signs of difficulty, but in my carefree mood I was unwilling to spoil "this perfect day" on the ocean by heading in early.

My difficulties had begun when I tried to get around the southernmost point. Without the protection of the island's land mass, I had ignorantly paddled into the direct path of the ocean currents, which then carried me along in their wake. From that point on, the situation had steadily worsened until now, and my life was in severe jeopardy. Gripped in a deadlock of my own fear, I racked my brain for a solution. I had only two choices, both of which could be fatal. I could not afford to make another rash decision. I was now over four hundred yards from shore. I could probably swim there by nightfall if I did it in slow, easy strokes, alternating between backstroke and breaststroke. When I got tired, I could float on my back until I regained my strength. Or better still, I could swim under the surface of the water, using the snorkel to breathe and my flippers to propel me. I assumed I could thus escape the strong currents that had taken me prisoner. I tried to evaluate how I thought my physical strength and resilience would hold out. It was an extremely long way, and my energy reserves were running on empty; but I was physically fit from working out daily. There was a fighting chance I would make it.

Looking down into the water, I clearly saw a mass of reefs swarming with sea life which were completely oblivious and unperturbed by my crisis. I was haunted by the thought that if I didn't make it back before nightfall, I would be trapped in this dark and foreboding under-world at the mercy of these predators. My skin crawled at the very thought of it. Paralyzed with overwhelming dread, I knew I could not go through with this! I was left with only one option—to stay in the bunca and wait to be rescued. This was certainly a grim alternative! I rationalized that I couldn't possibly leave the boat just floating out here. At the rate it was traveling, especially without my weight in it, within a short space of time it would be lost forever in the infinite expanse of the open sea. *The owner will have heart failure if I arrive back without his boat.* He would demand to know where it was. What could I tell him? *Oh, it is drifting somewhere out in the ocean.* I'm sure he would be extremely unhappy about my abandoning his boat.



Anyway, I reasoned, I had my money belt on me containing our passports, airline tickets, and travelers' checks. It wouldn't be overly sensible to let them be ruined, especially since the nearest passport office was nine hundred and fifty miles away in Manila. Not to mention, my camera, walkman, and other valuables in my bag would also be lost. When I weighed the pros and cons of the situation, it became apparent that to swim would not be the most logical decision. *'Okay, Michelle, calm down. Keep your head clear. Now, do I have any other alternatives?'* No, I had exhausted them all. The only choice open to me was to stay put in the safety of the bunca and let the currents carry me to land. I placated myself with the assurance that it was impossible not to get caught by the safety net of the adjacent island of Panay, which I appeared to be heading directly toward. I presumed the bunca would be washed up on Panay's long stretch of coastline. It would mean, of course, a long trek and hiring a boat to take me back to Boracay. Then there was the problem of arranging for the bunca to be picked up from Panay. What an enormous hassle it would create. I promised myself that this was the last time I would ever go canoeing alone.

After 15 minutes of working out what my options are I began paddling again. Suddenly, I realized that the bunca had shifted course! Instead of heading directly towards the island of Panay as I had presumed it would do, something disastrous had happened. I was now traveling parallel with the island about two hundred yards out. My belief that I had been capable of paddling back to Boracay was an inaccurate assumption. But worse still, the safety net of Panay Island, where I was sure the current would carry me - and my last bastion of hope - was incredibly dissolving before my eyes. This was all too much! All along, though I knew that I was in serious trouble, I was aware of the island of Panay and believed that, if worse came to worst, it was my safeguard. Now I was being transported not to Panay but parallel to it—hundreds of yards away. But all was not lost! A plan was forming itself in my mind. Obviously, the course the bunca had now taken would not reach Boracay or Panay, but I had one last fighting chance. In my estimation, the bunca would pass reasonably close to the tip of Caticlan, the farthestmost point of Panay.

The terrible fear I had previously held about swimming among the gruesome creatures of the sea had been dwarfed in the face of an even more horrific realization: that of spending a night alone in the clutches of the cold ocean, engulfed in blackness. With that thought, a decision was made. It was now 4:40 P.M.! At the stroke of five o'clock, I would take my chances and make a swim to Caticlan. Whatever the distance to shore, that was my appointed time. I calculated I would need a minimum of one hour to swim there. If I started any later than that, I would have to swim in darkness. That thought I found totally abhorrent.

I was now locked into a waiting game. Time was a paradox! In one way it seemed to stretch out into a nerve-racking eternity, the minutes ticking by in a frightening procession. At the other end of the spectrum, I was hurtled forward, closer and closer to my hour of dread. Time was the enemy I was unable to escape.

Picking up my snorkeling equipment, I began putting it on piece by piece, preparing myself for the inevitable swim to shore. I looked down at myself through the tight-fitting silicone mask. My vision was blurred by an array of saltwater drops which had formed over the glass. My body appeared contorted from the way I had squeezed myself sideways into the bunca, with my flippered feet hanging over the rim.

Sucking in large gasps of air through the snorkel, I tried to control my breathing. I could feel myself hyperventilating and could taste the bile rising in my throat as a spasm of nausea swept through me. Tearing the snorkel from my mouth, I lurched forward. My head dangling over the edge of the bunca, I dry retched until my stomach contracted with pain. I fell back to the bottom of the bunca, completely drained of all energy. How I was going to make that swim was beyond me, but I knew instinctively that it might be my only chance.

I scanned the ocean for John's cruiser for what seemed like the hundredth time. There was nothing! Where was everybody? I couldn't believe no one was out looking for me. Surely Mum must realize by now that I was missing. I clung desperately to the belief that any minute I would turn around and see Mum powering toward me in the boat. I wanted to weep with frustration. She was my mother. Didn't she sense that I was in trouble? Now I had five minutes left. I prayed, *Please come and rescue me before the clock strikes five*. She had only a few minutes left before my appointment with destiny. I found it inconceivable that my innocent venture had bought me to the brink of this life-threatening moment!

I was in dire need of a cigarette. I hoped my deliberately slow inhalation would serve as a pacifier, calming my nerves and giving me the courage to face the most frightening moment of my life, which was only two minutes away. My hands shook uncontrollably as I reached for the packet. Thank goodness they were dry! I placed the cigarette between my quivering lips and attempted to light it. I couldn't believe it. The lighter was soaking wet and refused to ignite. The irony of having dry cigarettes and a wet lighter was a catalyst that shattered my remaining fragile defenses. I let out a howl of frustration and black despair. Tears of anger and desperation burst forth with the fury of an erupting volcano.

Time had hurtled me forward to my appointed time. It was 4:48 P.M. I debated going now or waiting another two minutes. Obviously, nobody was coming to rescue me. *If I'm going to make it out of here alive*, I thought, *then it is up to me*.

With sickening dread, I raised myself into a sitting position, my legs dangling over the side of the bunca. My eyes were riveted on the island I was preparing to swim to. I didn't dare look into the ocean I was about to enter, with all the unseen dangers it contained. I knew with certainty that if I deliberated any longer, I would lose the edge and my courage would fail! Taking a deep breath, I summonsed up all my strength. Grabbing hold of the side of the bunca, I leaned forward and prepared to jump.

Suddenly the silence that reigned over the ocean was shattered as a loud, commanding voice from behind me said: *"Don't leave the boat!"*

IN TOO DEEP - 5

MICHELLE ... 5:00PM THURSDAY MARCH 9, SULU SEA

"What?" I said aloud although I had clearly heard the unmistakable words. A flood of relief washed over me. Someone had finally come to rescue me before I was forced to make the petrifying swim to shore. I released my grip on the bunca and swung around wildly, my heart beating fiercely in a state of apprehension.

There was no one in sight! As I lay there in shock, I tried to fathom who or what had said those words to me. Why shouldn't I leave the boat? If it wasn't Mum or a fisherman about to rescue me, then who was it? It certainly wasn't a figment of my own mind, upset as I was. Somebody had spoken to me, and I'd heard the instructions loud and clear!

Terror had returned with a vengeance, and indecision had been thrust upon me once again. I had resigned myself to make the perilous swim to shore, but now my feelings were ambivalent. The last remnants of light were being chased away by the encroaching night. How would anyone find me in the dark? Would they even bother to go out looking? To my horror I realized abruptly that even if Mum suspected I was in trouble and was out searching for me, she wouldn't be looking for me here, but around the other side of the island where she presumed I spent the day. And if I stayed in the bunca, I would be inevitably dragged along with the currents farther and farther out into the open sea. I felt sick with dread at the thought of spending the night out here, floating around in the darkness.

The waves already were a lot bigger and more ferocious, and the wind was rising in velocity, whipping up the ocean into a tumultuous squall. The thought of spending the night alone in the ocean compelled me to decide. I would stick to my original plan, no matter how hazardous, and attempt to swim to the shores of Caticlan, risking whatever the consequences might be. I was being carried farther from land every minute I procrastinated. This inaction could very well cost me my life. I had to act immediately.

My eyes sought the land. I looked longingly at the slither of firm earth I so desperately wanted to plant my feet upon. Positioning myself to jump, without warning, the same words were repeated with even more authority and conviction than previously.

"Don't leave the boat!" the loud and authoritative male voice said.

The last time I was unsure, but now I knew without a shadow of a doubt that this instruction was not the product of my own mind. It distinctly originated from somewhere outside myself. The voice seemed to literally boom down from the heavens above. Stunned by the power of the voice and the supremacy it conveyed, I squinted my eyes and gazed speculatively at the sky.

Aloud I asked, "Is that you, God?"

My question hung poignantly in the air. I waited expectantly for a response, straining my ears for the reassurance I longed to hear. Nothing but the sound of the roaring swells of water crashing around me reminded me of my predicament. This command I received was in total conflict with what I believed to be a logical course of action, namely to swim to shore. Nevertheless, the power of the voice had rendered me impotent and confused. I felt powerless to do anything except resign myself not to disobey and swim to shore, but to stay put in the bunca.

If that voice belonged to YHWH, then I assumed He knew of the danger I was in. In His wisdom, maybe He could foresee the future and know the perils of swimming. Anyway, by now I was so scared and confused that I didn't have the strength or the nerve to do anything else but sit there immobilized, watching myself drift further out to nowhere.

The sun had become a flaming ball of orange against the evening sky. It tinted the midnight blue water to gold. Dusk was falling fast! There was absolutely nothing more I could do, except wait and hope rescue would come. Stifling a sob, I felt a wave of helplessness wash over me. I longed to put my head in my lap and cry hysterically, to permit myself to weep until there was nothing left inside. But I couldn't allow myself to become so vulnerable. I swallowed hard at the lump in my throat that felt like a dislodged golf ball.

Lying back down in the bunca I removed the snorkel and mask but kept the flippers on and waited for the inevitable to happen—the impenetrable darkness to come upon me. The very thought of being blinded by the inky blackness of night, alone in the ocean, seemed incomprehensible. Crawling in the bottom of the bunca I began streaming with the sweat of utter panic as I visually digested the scene that awaited me. This brought to the surface of my mind the awful knowledge that fish feed at night. My stomach began to churn in motion to the sea surrounding me. I felt so horribly naked and exposed in this hostile environment, stripped of all my bravado and courage. The movie *Jaws* came unbidden to mind. I mentally surveyed the minute, seven-foot bunca; it was so flimsy it was liable to fall apart at any moment, or, more likely, capsize. The chance of being swept overboard was an all-too-real possibility. If there were hungry sharks lurking beneath the surface, I wouldn't last a minute.

It was now eight minutes past six! The sky had been transformed into a magnificent display of colors. On a royal blue backdrop, sunburst orange and slithers of magenta red and dusty pink lit up the sky. Under normal circumstances, I would have been rendered breathless by such beauty, but what it now represented simply sickened me. If only I could harness the sun and keep it with me. I didn't see how I was going to make it through the night in the stormy, pitch-black ocean. I begged the sun not to desert me, but I knew it was an inevitable occurrence of nature.

To restrain myself from having a complete emotional breakdown, I began to cling frantically to the belief that if I could just make it through the night, Mum would be here to rescue me tomorrow. By then she would have organized search-and-rescue parties to look for me at first light.

I began to whimper her name. "Mummy, I'm so scared. If only you were here with me, we could handle this together."

A logical thought wedged its way into my mind. *No, that would be worse. Who would know we were missing and come to search for us?* It was a bittersweet thought.

"Mum, help me!" I called into the nothingness, as tears of self-pity stung my eyes. I held dear to the one belief that Mum would be here tomorrow, but it was all I could do to hold on to my dwindling hope.

To my horror the waters around me had become progressively more turbulent, lifting the fragile bunca alarmingly skyward, and then plunging it ferociously downward into another swell of white water. Because of the outriggers, the bunca moved sideways instead of meeting the waves head-on. This was disastrous! It was frighteningly obvious that it would only take a sufficiently large wave to simply knock the bunca over completely. Would I be capable of righting the bunca if it capsized? I hoped I'd never have to put that to the test.

The waves continually washed into the bunca. I glanced down at my belongings slopping around in about seven inches of water which had collected at the bottom. In a reflex action that had become second nature, I began bailing water again. Thank God the bunca had come equipped with the white plastic bailer. My shoulders felt as if they were being wrenched from their sockets, but I had to do what I could to stop the bunca from sinking. I felt like an abandoned child, lonely, desperate, and petrified. It felt as if I were on the very edge of the world, about to be washed right over the side into nothingness. The sea appeared to be rolling toward a black void at the end of the earth and it was dragging me along with it. I was rendered impotent, with absolutely no control.

The sunset had now disappeared, leaving me to face the foreboding darkness alone, which seemed to infiltrate every part of my body until I couldn't separate myself from the night. The darkness and desolation had entered the core of me and refused to leave. Gazing skyward, I gasped as the full implication hit me. The signs were evident; a storm was gathering, and I would be caught in the midst of it. Was this horror movie? It didn't seem feasible that this was happening to me! My heart began thudding against my chest as complete panic set in. *'Oh, please, don't let this be true . . . a false alarm anything but what it appears to be.'* These tropical storms usually only lasted a few minutes, but in those few minutes the effects can be devastating. I'd experienced many in Thailand and knew they were laced with potential havoc.

The bunca wasn't even long enough for me to lie down in and barely wide enough for me to squeeze sideways into; so I doubted its seaworthiness even to make it through the night, let alone through a storm. If I were honest with myself, I knew the bunca didn't stand a chance. Only a miracle would save me now. Oh, if only I had hired the bigger boat which had a sail, then I would have been able to direct it into land. But today had been a series of fatal mistakes, each new one surpassing the other in bizarre misfortune.

I wanted to scream with frustration and self-pity! How could I have been so incredibly stupid? Maybe it wasn't stupidity so much as believing I was invincible, a superwoman or

something. I'd been reckless, taunting the elements. Well, now I was paying the price. I had been made to face my own vulnerability and mortality. I'd tempted destiny with an attitude of supreme confidence in my own ability to overcome any obstacle.

I did, however, have a gut feeling that my predicament was no coincidence. I wondered briefly; is YHWH trying to teach me something, get me to take a realistic look at myself and my life, or more likely bring me to a point of humility? I had to admit that I certainly needed it. But wasn't this lesson a little extreme, in fact bordering on outrageous? I could have understood if He had allowed me to suffer a bit of discipline to bring me into line, maybe until five o'clock, and then have someone come to rescue me, but this was taking it just a touch too far! What was equally frightening was that if I failed the test, would I get another chance? I was ready to promise anything in return for my life. I wanted to be released from this nightmare, to be home, safe and secure. I felt I had more than learned my lesson already.

"What is it you want from me, GOD? I'll do anything if You get me out of this mess—anything, I promise. I said aloud with an inner trembling, "If you are up there and are listening to me now, I want you to know that I'm scared with a fear I've never known. I'm sorry for what I've done in the past, but if it's in Your power to do miracles and change my situation, then I beg You to please help me. Do it now! Don't make me sweat it out through the night to prove a point. I get the message loud and clear and will change my attitude and my ways. I won't be neglectful of you anymore and will obey everything You say. Just please help me, I beg you! Don't let me die, not now, not here. I'm not ready yet! I suppose many people tell you that when they find out they have some terminal disease that they aren't ready to die. But who's ever ready to give up on life anyway, unless they are over ninety? I suppose it is fear of the unknown. What happens when we die? Where do we go? Is there really a heaven, or is that just a popular myth so people will not be afraid of death? I don't know what to believe, YHWH. But I do know I'm not ready to die."

I took a breath and paused....there was nothing but silence, so I continued to plead my case.

"Besides, I believe I've been a good person in my life; you know that. I've never intentionally hurt anyone; in fact, I've always gone out of my way to be caring and generous. I'd give my last cent to someone on the street, so why am I being punished? Aren't there enough wicked people in the world who deserve it far more than I? Murderers? Rapists? I know you have far more wisdom than I, but don't you honestly think that I'm being unduly punished? It seems to me to be a rather severe penalty for just reneging on my promises. Or maybe it's really the truth that only the good die young. When I watch the news, it surely seems that way. Nevertheless, you know that I'm in dire straits and I need your help. Please do something. I'm begging you!"

I sat back, straining my ears, waiting for the forgiving words. I scanned the ocean for the boat that would appear and the helicopters that would fly down from the sky and pluck me from these treacherous waters. My desperate pleas were answered by a cold, stark silence that seemed to penetrate the air, chilling me to the very bone. I was so utterly desolate, so terribly sorry for myself. *Nobody cares. Even YHWH has forgotten me.* But then again who did I think I was—making deals with the creator, plea bargains for my life? I had nothing to offer HIM in return; besides I didn't even know what He wanted of me.

I realized then, with a calculated calmness that if I were to make it out alive, I would have to rely totally on my own ability. Expecting a miracle was wishful thinking and childish. I needed to use all my resourcefulness, tenacity, and wits if I did not want to die.

I snapped to attention when I caught sight of a light on Caticlan flashing off and on. My heart jumped in response, thrilled by the evidence of human life. Was that John's boat signaling its whereabouts to me? Since I hadn't been found, maybe they had rigged up this device for me to locate them in the dark. The light was approximately two hundred yards away to my left, so I would have to battle against the currents to reach the signal. The odds were a hundred to one that I would make it all the way, but if I could only get close enough to scream out for help, possibly they would hear me.

My sense of helplessness evaporated as I spun into action. Picking up the oars, I frantically paddled toward the flashing light. I barely felt the pain shooting up my arms as I rowed powerfully, in anticipation of being rescued. My vicious strokes pounded the choppy seas with a desperate urgency. This was my last chance! The howling wind had whipped the ocean into a violent turmoil. I was oblivious to the gallons of salty water crashing upon me. If only I could get there in time, I would spend the night in a warm bed.

The bunca was filling up with water to a dangerously high level; I could see I would have to stop again and bail. Throwing the oars to one side, I grabbed the plastic bailer and began bailing with frenzied motions until I managed to rid the bunca of enough water to make it safe. It was a race against time, one I couldn't afford to lose. I was petrified that they would leave if they didn't find me soon. I wanted to scream out, *'Don't leave. Please wait for me. I'm on my way,'* but I knew it was useless. The wind would rip the words from my mouth before I barely said them. No, I would have to wait till I was closer. I wished I had a couple of flares that I could set off, although I hadn't assumed they'd be necessary for a leisurely day's outing. I had spent today assuming too much and yet not enough.

Studying more closely the flashing light I was heading for, I unexpectedly made a shocking discovery. Now I could plainly see that it was not John's boat signaling to me as I had believed, but in fact a lighthouse at Caticlan, the tip of Panay.

"Oh no!" I groaned, feeling the agony of my disappointment. My shoulders slumped forward as I let the oars fall to the bottom of the bunca. In My last hope of being plucked from the ocean tonight dissolved before my eyes! Now I was heading into the infinite expanse of the open seas. The lighthouse was my last sighted contact with land and my last contact with humans. I had the sense of being captured by an alien adversary.

Taking a deep breath, I gave up the fight and slowly removed the flippers. Twisting my body into a contorted position, I managed to squeeze down into the bottom of the bunca, my hips firmly wedged between the sides. Lying on my stomach, with bent knees, I hung my feet over the end of the bunca. To prevent my face from being submerged in the sea water at the bottom, I rested my forehead on my rolled-up sarong. This position only barely enabled me to breathe, made more difficult by a plank of wood that dug sharply into

my ribs. My body was in agony; however, my mind was experiencing a far worse torture. I couldn't bear to look at the sea around me any longer; it had become a raging beast. The waves had taken on a ghoulish appearance; each white-crested wave had claws and long tongues of foaming water lashing out to grab hold of me, to claim me. Burrowing myself as far as I could into the hull of the bunca, I tried to escape the reality. Instant replays of me as a little girl flooded my mind. As a child I used to curl myself up into a ball, pulling the covers over my head, taking refuge from the grisly night monsters who danced about on my bedroom walls. It had worked for me then; I believed what I didn't see, couldn't hurt me. If the images became too scary, then I'd employ a childhood tactic to escape from the terrors of the night. But what I faced now were not imaginary creatures taking form from the shadows of the trees blowing in the wind. This was beyond the realms of fantasy, far worse than any nightmarish dream. The breakers that slammed against the bunca confirmed that this was one nightmare I wouldn't wake up from and say, *'Thank God, it was only a dream!'* This was real.

One thought that consistently returned in the medley of emotions was, *'Am I going to die out here tonight? Is my life already over before it's had a chance to begin?'* It couldn't be the truth; surely it wasn't possible; I wouldn't let it be! I'd fight to the death!

The sky abruptly exploded into sheets of rain which beat down on my naked back mercilessly. I lay sprawled in the slopping water which had filled the bunca to a hazardous level. It required all my will power and energy to force myself to sit up and begin bailing. I was exhausted beyond comprehension. Bailing water and fear were my constant companions. The sea showed me not an ounce of compassion or respite. I was trapped in a monotonous cycle: The bunca filled up with water almost as fast as I could bail. Not only was I being battered by the sea but now also from the teeming skies and the wind. Would this vigil ever cease?

A loud clap of thunder boomed across the sky, sounding like freight trains smashing into each other head-on. I sat bolt upright, registering the cataclysmic conditions around me. The storm was gathering momentum. For an instant the sky was ablaze with a blinding bolt of lightning. This illumination revealed everything I had tried to avoid acknowledging.

The waves lumbering towards me were gigantic. The bunca in comparison was no more than a matchstick being tossed around in the immense ocean. Each time I convinced myself the waves couldn't possibly get any bigger, an unfathomable monster, higher than the rest, lifted the bunca skyward. The bunca was completely out of control, being flung in whichever direction the waves tossed it. My sight was blinded by the salty water that filled my eyes. I was frozen with terror! There was no time to think, feel, or be sick. All I could do was to hold on for dear life and wait for it to end.

Again, images of the bunca capsizing flashed unbidden into my mind. What would I do if this happened? Would I be able to find the bunca in the darkness? Even if I did manage to locate it, would I have the strength to hang on to the sides? Or right it? Or would this night end in my death? Would I drown in the churning water now only inches from swallowing me up? When would this nightmare end? Where was morning? Surely it was near. Time had become distorted in an endless procession of darkness. I lost all perception of time and felt

as if I were traveling through a warped black labyrinth. How long would it be before the morning light would release me from this prison of darkness? The only thought that kept me going was that at first light I knew Mum would have rescue teams out searching for me. I believed I only had to hold on another couple of hours more and my ordeal would be over.

Awhile later, I noted with enormous relief that the storm had finally abated. The torrential downpour of wind-driven rain had ceased. Looking up into the sky at last I could see the first signs of dawn. Relief washed over me in a tidal wave of emotion. The worst was over! I had survived the night!

I resumed my position lying face down in the bottom of the bunca. In the approaching light of morning I noticed a sheltered and dry compartment in the front of the bunca where I had stored my belongings. *'What a perfect place to rest my head,* I thought. *At least I will be able to breathe without inhaling water.'* Pushing my bag back further to make room, I began to squeeze my head inside.

"Don't put your head in there," the voice I heard before commanded. It was loud and distinctive.

Too exhausted to be surprised, I automatically followed the instruction without hesitation, obeying without reasoning why. In my severe exhaustion my brain tried with much difficulty to fathom who or where this source of information was coming from. With painstakingly slow thought processes, I found I was incapable of making any sense of it. I was shaken and a little apprehensive about delving into the supernatural occurrence. Not understanding why it was given or identifying exactly who had given it, I appreciated the advice nevertheless. Through a foggy mental haze, I still couldn't help wondering why I shouldn't place my head under the stern of the bunca.

The answer instantly popped into my head, *'If the boat capsizes, your neck would be snapped in two'.*

'Oh, of course', I thought to myself, nodding my head in agreement. *'Why didn't I think of that?'* Obviously, my invisible benefactor had realized the danger.

Rolling up my towel I lay my forehead on it. Fatigue and fear had driven itself into every cell of my being. I willed myself to rest but to remain marginally conscious as I felt my mind spiraling downward into a tunnel of pitch blackness. I continually had to shake myself awake. A vicious blow of water crashed on me, suddenly jerking me wide awake. My mind leapt into action. I automatically sat up, grabbing the plastic bailer, and began furiously emptying the bunca of the deluge of water that had poured into it.

In the golden haze of morning the island of Panay was now barely visible. A heavy mist hung low over the mountainous ranges, blanketing the peaks. I realized with disbelief how very far I had traveled out to sea during the long night. I calculated I must be at least thirty

nautical miles from Panay. How on earth would I ever get back? I no longer possessed the will or energy to face the enormity of this problem. It was too colossal for me to even begin to comprehend. I retreated into the safety of the bunca, burying my face in the bottom; my only alternative was to lie down, wait, and pray to be rescued.

No sooner had I lay down when an enormous wall of water crashed on me. I tried to sit up under the weight of the water filling the bunca, but to my horror I saw it was completely swamped. *'Oh no, it's going to sink!'* A rush of panic surged through me. In a wild fury, I began bailing. My eyes were riveted on the ocean. Humongous waves in trains were moving towards me at breakneck speed. I stopped bailing. It was futile! The waves were only a matter of seconds away; now my destiny was inevitable. I braced myself for the worst and uttered a hurried prayer. In a frozen, heart-stopping moment, I turned to see a mammoth wave rearing up in front of me a split second before it struck. This was the end!

The bunca was smashed into with such violent force that it was thrown high into the air like matchwood. I lost contact with the bunca and felt myself free falling as I was hurtled through the air. The bunca was gone; I had lost hold of my lifeline. I collided with such a savage force upon the ocean's surface that the sheer impact forced the breath from my lungs. I felt myself spiraling down under the sea, ploughing deeper and deeper into its foreboding depths.

EXTREME REVELATIONS - 6

RACHELLE ... 6:00PM THURSDAY MARCH 9, BORACAY ISLAND

The empty space of beach where the bunca should have been was foreboding. It screamed the truth at me. Michelle hadn't come back! The last lingering light of day was diminishing in the shadows of the evening sky. The ocean . . . I couldn't bear to look at it. Was my daughter lost out there, alone and terrified? The dreadful uncertainty of not knowing was slicing into my heart like the blade of a knife.

The sound of David's voice behind me transported me back from the black despairing thoughts. He sat down on the sand beside me, placing a comforting arm around my shoulders.

"Rachelle, I'm sure you'll find that Michelle will turn up. I think you're underestimating her ability to take care of herself. If you want my opinion, she is probably sipping cocktails around the other side of the island."

Everything inside me rose up, adamantly rejecting his explanation. "No, David," I insisted. "I know Michelle better than that. She would not be so thoughtless."

"Well, you do know her better than I do, but it's highly possible she's gotten stuck around the other side of the island with the threat of a storm coming on. Possibly she may have thought it safest to wait until it has blown over."

"I suppose," I said as I tried to imagine the likelihood of this happening. "But sitting here helplessly, doing nothing is eating away at me. Shouldn't I alert the sea rescue or at least do something? David, it's my daughter who could be out there." I said, desperately trying to retain a degree of control.

"At this time of night there is really not much more anyone can do. It would be hazardous to put the boats out. Let's not panic or jump to conclusions. By tomorrow we will know for sure. Then we can raise the alarm and get a full-scale rescue underway at first light."

Seeing the wildly fearful look in my eyes he added, "I can't explain it, but I feel wherever she is she's okay." He spoke with the impact of complete conviction.

"If it will make you feel better, I'll walk up the beach and talk to a few of the local fishermen who may have seen her this afternoon. I'm sure everything will turn out fine. I'll be by early in the morning. Take it easy until then, okay?" he said squeezing my hand.

I watched as his tall muscular body strode purposefully up the beach and disappeared into the shadows of the palm trees. Tomorrow I would be forced to face the truth head-on, but tonight I needed action to release the spiraling maelstrom of uncertainty. Anything would be preferable to waiting, doing nothing. My eyes sought the ocean. The moon had paved a shimmering path across the surface of the sea.

"Where are you, Michelle? Where are you?" I said aloud into the nothingness.

I was too terrified to cry, for fear I would shatter my fragile defenses. I was aware of the steel-like grip my constricted emotions had wound around my heart, to the point where even breathing had become labored. I wished desperately to divorce myself from this trauma; the consequences were too shocking to contemplate. Keeping a vigil in the vacant space

where Michelle's bunca should have been, held me paralyzed to that spot. My mind was anchored to sanity by the only saving thought: There was a slim chance that she could still be on the island. Tomorrow would confirm or deny this, but tomorrow was an endless eternity away. How could I pass the hours not knowing until morning? *Sleep! That is my way out. I'll go to sleep.* I desperately needed to block out the reality which had reduced me to powerlessness. My shoulders sagged in relief as I remembered I did have some sleeping pills somewhere in my bag. I found them essential when we traveled; and now, thank God I had the means to escape the anxiety, at least temporarily.

Unbuckling my arms from around my knees which I had been tightly clutching, I stood up on shaky legs, attempted to balance myself, and made my way towards our bungalow. As I moved through the palm trees, the truth assaulted me. Our bungalow was empty—Michelle was not there! I stood reeling in the devastating knowledge that my little girl was gone. In a waking sleepwalk I dragged my leaden feet through the sand towards the bungalow. The intense solitude and unnerving silence that met me sent a fresh wave of shock through me. My first impulse was to run, run far away from the place that taunted me with Michelle's undeniable absence.

The scene before me took on a mystical quality. Pools of golden light shone from the lanterns which hung enchantingly from the surrounding bungalows, where the sound of tinkling laughter floated to my ears on the evening breeze. It struck like an arrow in my heart! How could there still be laughter when my daughter might be lost at sea? I climbed the two stairs onto our balcony, turned the key in the lock, and with trepidation opened the door.

Michelle's belongings took on grotesque forms in the flickering glow of the lanterns, projecting frightening shadows on the bamboo walls. Her backpack lay open in one corner, clothes lay draped over the edge, spilling over onto the floor where she had hurriedly left them in her excitement to get our day's excursion underway. Her workout equipment had been tossed into a corner, make-up lay scattered on the table, and the hand mirror which had reflected her face that very morning ominously rested face down. A pervading atmosphere of desolation hung in the air. My strength began to crumble. I was aware how shockingly alone I was. There were no friends to support me, no arms to hold me, and tell me it's all going to be okay.

Moving into the bathroom I fumbled with the medicine case; tipping two sleeping pills out of the bottle, I swallowed them quickly. I prayed for them to work and release me from the agony of not knowing where Michelle was. To my right hand lay Michelle's toothbrush and toothpaste squeezed into the imprint her hand had made that morning. *'Would she ever get to use them again?'* I thought morbidly. *'Don't think!'* To speculate what had happened to Michelle would be to subject myself to further torment and add salt to an already open wound. I reasoned there was absolutely nothing I could do until morning. To torture myself further by picturing her floating somewhere out in the black sea was so excruciatingly painful that I knew for the preservation of my sanity it was a vision I must at all costs avoid.

Staggering toward the bed I drew back the mosquito net and slumped down onto the bed. Instantly, distorted images of Michelle floating in that tiny craft in the pitch blackness

of the ocean infiltrated my mind. I cast them out, immediately knowing if I dwelt on these pessimistic images I would crack into a thousand pieces.

The pills were beginning to take effect. I was feeling the wrought-up tenseness of every nerve and muscle unwind the strangle hold they had on me. Any time my mind threw up a thought or frightening image, I quickly slammed a trapdoor tightly shut. I could not afford to succumb to its temptation. I had to keep one last illusion intact, that Michelle was not lost at sea but over on the other side of Boracay Island.

Lying outstretched on the bed, encased in the surrounding mosquito net, I felt cocooned by this pristine white shroud. It seemed bizarre that since this morning the entire atmosphere of the room had altered dramatically. Gone was the bubbly enthusiastic mood, replaced by a sinister fear and foreboding. Outside, the strong tropical winds had whipped up the leafy fronds of the palm trees, slapping them against each other. The sounds of the waves breaking powerfully onto the beach sent a chill of alarm through me.

I drifted into a dream landscape of fantasy where impressions can be even more frightening than the world of waking hours. I saw Michelle's beautiful blonde hair being splayed out like tentacles, floating rhythmically in the ocean currents. She was face down in the water with her slender arms outstretched on the surface. She looked so peaceful bobbing up and down gently on the waves. A colorful tropical fish swam out from a clump of hair strands, darting in and out, touching the ends of the lengths searching for food. I watched transfixed as several other fish appeared, opening and closing their mouths, playfully weaving through the foreign substance they had mistaken for seaweed. One nibbled at her earlobe while his mate attempted to make a home inside her ear. Michelle was oblivious to these proceedings, unperturbed and free from care, as she drifted with the movement of the swell.

From the top right-hand corner of my mind, a beautiful, ethereal woman came floating in slow motion into the background of the picture. Her lips reflected an unfathomable smile, as if behind that smile were hidden a significant secret that went beyond my understanding. My attention was riveted and, in a fleeting moment of pleasure, I instantly recognized the angelic woman as my beloved grandmother, Esther Cohen. Empathy and compassion emanated from her countenance as she smiled at me. The compassion from her pale blue eyes penetrated the depths of my soul, balm the frayed edges of my pain. I felt as if under her gaze a sweet healing potion had been poured over me.

Her arms were reaching out, reaching out to someone, calling a name I couldn't quite catch. What did she want? Was it me she was calling? I strained my ears to hear the words of this lovely apparition, who was standing slightly apart from the essence of my picture. Grand's posture still retained its regal bearing, her hair immaculately coiffured as I had remembered it. Behind vaporous wisps I could see she was wearing the dress of peacock blue brocade that had been one of her favorites.

I desperately wished I could talk to her and hear what she was saying. Her arm beckoned, *Come, Come*, she appeared to be motioning. I managed to catch a fragment of her dialogue. Was she calling my name? My God, no, it's Michelle she is calling! She's calling

for Michelle! Instantly I turned my eyes back to Michelle, but she had gone! Panic seized me! Why did I take my eyes off her, even for a moment?

'Oh no, my baby, my Michelle,' I groaned. Had she been taken away with Gran and passed over to another dimension of life beyond my reach? Had she gone to heaven?

There where Michelle had been was only a broken doll, lying face up in the water, only the torso and head remaining. Where the arms and legs should have been were black gaping holes. My eyes were suddenly held captive by the upturned face. Stark horror struck me with a smashing blow. The doll's eyes were missing! It was just a body. The windows of the soul that registered life were missing, and in their place were two sunken black caverns. Whoever had lived in that body was no longer there; the life force had been extinguished. It was only a body now; the personality of the doll had been retracted, and the soul transported to another realm.

In a distorted confusion I screamed out, "Michelle, where are you? Come back to me! What is happening? Someone, tell me what is happening!" Turning my focus back to the corner of the picture, I was about to ask my grandmother what on earth was going on for I was sure she would know, but she was gone.

"Don't leave me. Please, don't leave me alone," I called out.

Turning back to face the doll, I was just in time to see the last glimpse as the entire screen went blank as if someone had pulled the plug. The sound of my own voice screaming instantly released me from this nightmare. I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed, shaking so forcefully I was unable to stop myself. I was bathed in perspiration which seemed to have trickled out every pore. The thudding of my heart pumped vigorously against my chest. Whimpering inconsolably, I tried to shake myself loose from this shocking dream.

It took some time to orient myself and realize where I was. The fleeting moments of disillusionment were shattered. I was back to the present, instantly plugged back into the pain I had tried so desperately to escape. I turned to look at the side of the bed where Michelle had slept only the night before. It was empty! In her place, neatly folded at the end of the bed, was her cuddly blanket, which she used as a sheet when traveling. I reached over and took hold of the soft, fleecy folds of fabric, burying my face into the rug as if I could bring her closer to me.

Stripped of my defenses, I felt myself crumbling under the crushing weight of the implications of my dream. Rocking back and forth, hugging Michelle's blanket to me, I was ravaged by waves of uncontrollable anguish as the tears fell, breaking through the last bastions of control. I gave way to the painful truth. My beautiful girl was either lost out at sea or dead—as the vivid dream had blatantly suggested.

"No, no, it is not true!" I groaned between streams of tears. I screamed my denial against this dream. Was my deceased grandmother reassuring me that where Michelle

had gone there was nothing to fear, that she was in loving hands? No, I could not accept that.

"She is not dead," I cried. "She's not dead. Oh, God, please, don't let her be dead. I could not bear it!"

It seemed impossible to comprehend that only yesterday we had spent the evening together in such high spirits. So distorted had time become, that last night remained trapped in a warped maze where nothing seemed real anymore. I let my mind drift back and retrace the memories of just last night when Michelle and I had spent a wonderful time together. The night air enveloped us like a velvety cloak. The sultry heat seemed to hug the body and stimulate the senses. Tripping through the tropically warm water which lapped gently onto the shore, we sauntered up the beach hand in hand, abandoning ourselves to peals of happy laughter just for the sheer enjoyment of it. Diamond stars lit the ebony sky in a glittering silver trail. The Milky Way was so clear that it appeared translucent, allowing the naked eye to penetrate its depths.

My feet had the impulse to dance to the vibrant, pulsating music which floated toward us from the clubs which lined the foreshore. A throng of casually dressed holiday makers relaxed in this beautiful setting. Small groups of people lounged contentedly at the bamboo tables and chairs placed strategically along the beach outside the Beachcomber. The enchanting surroundings wove a mysterious atmosphere in and around us. Pure happiness washed over me as I drank in the atmosphere. It was hard to believe that only a matter of days before I was locked into the nine-to-five syndrome in the stressful world of the media. My Sydney office seemed light years away.

While ordering a Midori margarita for Michelle and a strawberry daiquiri for me, we saw David sitting at a table with the fun crowd of people we had met the previous night. As we moved toward their table, we were greeted by a cacophony of exuberant voices. The young intrepid travelers who made up the group were from Sweden, Germany, America, and Australia.

I had surreptitiously watched David and Michelle together. Even though they had only known each other such a short time, the rapport between them was evident. David was typical of many American men that I had met—friendly, open, and instantly at ease with people. He'd naturally taken it upon himself to ensure everyone was comfortable, accepted into the group, and enjoying the evening. I could understand why these two were attracted to each other. Both saw a reflection of themselves in the other. Michelle possessed a spontaneous sense of humor which she injected into every situation; even in the most melodramatic instances she could always see the funny side. Her uncanny sense of the ridiculous would break the tension when others resorted to worry. David instantly recognized this quality and found an evenly-matched sparring partner. During the evening I concluded they had each found a compatible companion to enjoy their sundrenched holiday with. I had no doubt we would be seeing a lot more of David.

Later we lay on the bed in our bungalow, giggling together over some of the jokes we managed to remember and the interesting characters we had met. Our chattering began to

dwindle as tiredness took over. I reached over and took Michelle's hand, entwining our fingers together.

"You have the softest hands, darling."

"Have I, Mum? Thanks. I've never thought about it. No one has ever said that to me before. But mothers do tend to be a touch biased when it comes to their children, do they not?" she laughed.

"You looked as if you were having a great time tonight."

"I did. It was fantastic! I haven't laughed so much in years. I'm enjoying myself so much, and it is only the beginning. Just think of it, we have weeks left to have fun."

Then I said, seriously, "Thanks for the holiday, I really appreciate it. I love you, Mich!"

"I love you too. Mum!"

"Goodnight sweetheart. Sweet dreams," I said, squeezing her hand in mine.

That took place only yesterday! Was it possible time could be warped like that? It seemed a lifetime ago when she had lain safely in bed, contemplating the future weeks with anticipation. I wanted to see her face again, to take hold of her hand and tell her not to be afraid, that everything would be all right, Mummy's here—just as I did when she was a little girl with a skinned knee or bruised ego. But now she was far from me, lost God knows where. The choking emotion was rising again. I knew I had to get out of bed. Standing up in the small room, I began pacing the floor. If Michelle was still alive somewhere out in the ocean, then a plan of action to rescue her would have to be initiated first thing in the morning.

Suddenly I heard a rumbling in the distant skies. I stood rooted to the spot as I strained to hear further evidence of bad weather. Before I had a chance to think, my fears were confirmed. An earth-shattering clap of thunder pealed almost directly overhead. The throbbing patter of rain began pelting noisily onto the bamboo-thatched roof of the bungalow. The drops fell intermittently at first, but quickly developed into a deluge. Heavy tropical rain fell in huge drops as the heavens opened up. I could hear the wind lashing the palm trees, carrying the sodden rain in its wake. Driven by the wind, the rain smashed against meager bamboo walls which were laced together with flax.

I rushed to the door needing to know if the velocity of the storm was as bad as it sounded. Opening the door, I was physically forced back by a gust of wind which drove the rain into my face. I strained to close the door against the weather. The ferocity of the storm was worse than I could have imagined. Not just rain and wind, my first tropical storm was sudden and savage! Drying my face with a towel I paced back and forth on the bare floor, rallying my pitiful voice against the storm that raged around me.

"Not now! Why is this happening?" I shouted at the heavens.

If by some miracle Michelle had managed to stay alive until now, clinging to that minute boat, then surely this storm would be the element of her undoing. I knew if she was still alive, she would be utterly petrified and clinging to life by a delicate thread. The sense of powerlessness plagued me. This cruelty was aimed at the core of my maternal in-

instincts—the thought that Michelle needed me, and I was unable to do anything to help her until morning.

Suddenly the sound of Michelle's voice sounded in my ears. *'Mum, help me. I'm so scared. Come and save me, please. I need you. I don't want to die!'* In anguish I could endure no longer. I clapped my hands over my ears and tried to block out her desperate cries. But it was in vain. The cries were coming from the realms of my own fear which raged through me like a devouring beast.

I began sketching mental scenarios of how it might still be possible for her to have hung on to life. Recalling the events of the previous morning, first I envisioned the bunca. It was not more than seven feet long, looking much like a canoe with no sail and barely wide enough to sit in. I remembered we had to perch on top of a narrow plank of wood that strutted across its width, precariously balanced with nothing to hold on to. The canoe was flanked by two flimsy outriggers, and the extent of the freeboard above the waterline was, at a generous guess, not more than eight inches. Judging by what we experienced yesterday morning, when it was necessary for us to bail water every five minutes in relatively calm waters, I could see in my mind the deluge of water breaking over the rim of the bunca in choppy seas.

Turning over the possibilities in my mind, I didn't see how she would manage to keep afloat under such horrendous conditions. Being shockingly honest with myself, I realized in such conditions the bunca was not seaworthy or even capable of staying afloat. If this had been the case, what were her alternatives? Visualizing the outriggers, though the boat might be submerged under the surface of the water, I felt that conceivably the bunca might not sink entirely. If this happened, I wondered what Michelle could do to keep from drowning?

Would it be possible for her to curl her legs around the submerged hull, hanging on to the arms of the outriggers for support? This would help her keep her head above water. Logic told me this was an extremely farfetched theory. With only the strength of her limbs to keep her attached, I reasoned that the first sizable wave would sweep her into the jaws of the sea. I was under no illusion as to the gravity of the situation. The more I rationalized her chances, the more obvious how devastating were the odds stacked against her survival. I knew we needed a miracle. I desperately needed to believe in the possibility that Michelle was on the island, or at least alive. I held fast to the hope that at any time she would come bursting through the door as large as life, her exuberant nature shedding sunshine on the dark, oppressive cloud of uncertainty that hung over me.

I was so relieved when the storm finally began to subside, losing its murderous intensity. The first signs of dawn were evident in the cloudy morning sky. The time had come to reveal the crucial truth. Was Michelle, in fact, still on the island, or were my real fears going to be verified?

Locking the bungalow door behind me I set out on the trek that would take me around the farthest point of Boracay. The entire length of the beach as far as the eye could see was deserted. As I was striding at an urgent pace along the water's edge, my eyes were held

captive by the intense stretch of water. It had never looked so ominous. With squinted eyes I scanned the ocean in the unrealistic hope that I might see Michelle's boat bobbing out there. There was nothing!

Approaching the jagged rocks at the pinnacle, to my dismay I found the high tide had swelled up around the rocks. I would have to climb over. Picking my way over the top, I was alarmed when I realized the edge fell away into the swirling water. To continue my search, I would have to jump in and swim around the jutting rock to the next beach. Taking a deep breath, I leapt off the rock, submerging for an instant, then bobbing back up to the surface. With strong strokes I easily swam the ten yards to the shore. Dripping wet, I hauled myself up onto the beach, wiping the salty water from my eyes. The saturated clothing clung to me, although I knew in this heat it would be dry very quickly.

It was the first time I had seen the island from this perspective. Boracay was far more remote and undeveloped than the popular stretch of white beach, where the tourists congregated. I was startled by the rugged, primitive outlook. Powerful waves gathered strength and crashed noisily onto the beach, and the obviously marked difference of this exposed beach astounded me. This stretch of the island was not protected and was exposed to the open sea. The isolated beauty of this wind-swept side had a somewhat breathtaking appeal. My alien presence was magnified against this desolate beach. Gone were the soft white sand and the gentle lap of the turquoise sea.

Noticing figures at the far end of the bay, I hastened my step. Acknowledging the rough water around this side of the island struck me once again as to Michelle's plight. If she had ventured around this point yesterday she would have found herself in vastly different waters. I grimaced at the thought of how very easy it would be for a small boat to be carried out to sea. I tried to quicken my pace, but my feet sunk into the freshly wet sand. The silhouettes had now taken form; the natives of the island appeared to be preparing for a day's fishing. Their inquisitive faces turned towards me, momentarily distracted from their task of mending their nets. I approached one of them.

"Hello! Have you seen a girl with blonde hair paddling a small bunca around here yesterday?" I pronounced this slowly, pointing to my blonde hair.

Looking dismayed, he simultaneously shrugged his shoulders and shook his head saying, "No English."

Communicating by sign language, he motioned for me to wait, and then disappeared over the dunes. Several minutes later he returned with half the village in tow. I could see astounded faces and gaping mouths at this unexpected early morning encounter. Obviously by the number of people who turned out, the sight of this blonde lady wishing to speak to them would no doubt be the highlight of their day.

A young native boy, looking decidedly nervous, was pushed to the forefront of the group. "Hello, ma'am, I speak good English," he said grinning widely, pleased that all those boring lessons had in fact become useful.

"That's good," I said, grateful that the territory I was in was not so alien. "Have you seen a blonde lady paddling a bunca around here yesterday?"

"No, not me," he said after a second's thought.

"Could you please ask the other people for me? Maybe one of the fishermen saw her. It's my daughter. She went out in a bunca yesterday and hasn't come back yet."

In a rushed dialogue he excitedly explained my unexpected presence. I waited with bated breath for their response which could confirm or deny her destiny. The shaking of heads and sympathetic expressions revealed the answer before it was spoken.

"Sorry, nobody has seen a lady yesterday."

My spirits sagged. "How could I get around the next bay?"

"Only by boat. We can take you, okay?" he suggested, enthusiastic at the prospect of this adventure.

Fortunately, I still had money in my own bag for a few necessary items. But Michelle had taken the money belt with her containing our passports, all our travelers' cheques and almost all the money.

"Yes, that is very kind of you. I will pay you. Is one hundred pesos okay?"

Money speaks all languages; even the nonspeaking village elders seemed to comprehend this sentence. As if I had spoken a magic word, ten willing hands were instantly spurred into action to carry a large bunca down to the water's edge. Preparing to enter the water, I bent to roll up the legs on my jeans. A robust young man, instructed no doubt by an elder, indicated that he would piggyback me to the waiting bunca. Peals of high-pitched giggles rose in a chorus from the villagers at this extraordinary spectacle.

The bunca glided powerfully through the choppy water under the expert control of these two strong young boys. This small band of people who had collected on the beach faded from view as we maneuvered around the point into the next bay. Being back into those treacherous waters yet again started my heart pounding. I sat in silence, my eyes riveted to the beach for the sight of Michelle's bunca. If it was at all possible, this beach was even more rugged and desolate than the one I had just left. There was absolutely no sign of life there. The farfetched possibility that Michelle had spent the night here was beyond the realms of believable explanations. As the boys rowed further along parallel to the beach, I realized the futility of it all. My worst fears had been confirmed. She wasn't sheltering around the other side of the island. She must be out at sea! Though I had sensed it all along, I knew I had to eliminate every possibility before sending out a full-scale search party. Silent tears of anguish blinded me at this tragedy, too shocking to contemplate. My lips were quivering as I instructed the boys to turn the boat around and head back. They had a battle steering the boat around as forceful waves battered against the sides.

A small crowd had gathered on the foreshore, inquisitive of the outcome of our search. As I stumbled out of the boat into shallow water, strong arms supported me onto the beach. I felt the gaze of many eyes as if they were trying to understand my thoughts. With a surge of courage, I smiled weakly and turned away from her gentle eyes. I paid the willing helpers the money and took off at a run along the beach. The need to be back in civilization and raise the alarm was paramount.

The voice of a withered, bandy-legged native man reached me. "You no find daughter?"

The repressed sobs caught in my throat. I was unable to answer. Compassionate understanding and the common bond of parenthood were revealed in a sorrowful expression of empathy in his coffee-colored eyes. From within, something screamed out, '*No, not now; don't show me sympathy!*' One tender look or display of compassion could disarm my fragile control, rendering me useless for the task that I had ahead of me. If Michelle was still alive and out on that ocean, then she needed me. I knew I had to get back and raise the alarm, arrange a sea search and get the boats out to sea. No, this was no time to fall apart. Sydney seemed a very long way. It was difficult to comprehend this was happening. The only thing real to me was the heart-wrenching pain and fear that had taken up residence within my body.

My legs wouldn't carry me quickly enough. The action of running, I found, mildly relieved the snapping tension of the past twelve hours. At least now I was able to do something positive and constructive to save Michelle. A plane! That's what I needed. A plane! I remembered Manila had a huge American military base. No doubt there would be rescue planes and helicopters available to help find her. All I needed was to get to a phone and call the Australian Embassy. They should be able to get an air search underway within a few hours.

"Hang on, Michelle! I'm coming to get you. Hold on just a little bit longer," I said into the wind as I ran breathlessly along the beach.

The resort was deserted apart from a few early morning joggers. It seemed inconceivable that such a magnificent day in paradise could possibly turn out to be the most tragic day of my life. I almost expected the sun not to have risen today and the skies to be raining tears of sorrow, but no! It was the same world as yesterday, continuing as if the loss of my child went unnoticed in the heavens.

Suddenly, I was tantalized by the thought that maybe Michelle would be home when I got back. *Don't build up unrealistic expectations*, I told myself. The disappointment of another false hope was something I could not stand. Arriving back at the bungalow I barely glanced at the empty space on the beach. Steeling myself, I approached our bungalow; even so I held my breath as it came into view. There was no sign of her! Opening the door, I was bombarded once again with the absence of Michelle. Objects seemed to leap out at me, emphasizing her disappearance. I became claustrophobic as the walls seemed to close in on me.

Changing my wet clothes quickly, I was out of there immediately, for I didn't want to spend a second longer in that room so full of painful reminders. For what seemed like the hundredth time, I found myself running up the beach to the main village where I believed a telephone would be available. Out of the corner of my eye, the sea taunted me. I knew it held a crucial secret, one I desperately needed to know. The sea had captured my beloved child! Now I was about to pit myself against it and retrieve what belonged to me!

DOOMED TO DIE -7

MICHELLE ... 6.00AM FRIDAY, MARCH 10TH CUYO EAST PASSAGE

In one heart-stopping moment I found myself plummeting downward into a current of suffocating foam, buried in turmoil of furious water. I became trapped in a violent whirlpool, held captive by the powerfully sucking force that was trying to swallow me up. My entire world became white and swirling. The weight of the water held me down, prisoner. Struggling to get to the surface, I clawed at the heavy barricades of water. In a frenzy I fought for control, not knowing which direction was up. It was as if an iron fist had reached out and seized my lungs.



I was instantly panic-stricken. The precious life-giving air my lungs demanded was out of my reach. *Keep calm*, I urged myself, but it was futile to battle instinct. I had to get air! Seconds passed; the acute burning in my chest was magnified until the pain was unbearable. Every time I neared the surface, the waves would break, crashing on me and making it impossible for me to get air.

'Please stop! Just for one second, just one breath', I silently begged the sea. My head began feeling light, almost feathery, whereas my body felt like a leaden weight. A numb dizziness took hold of me; my brain began starving for oxygen as I experienced the first assaults of vertigo. I struggled not to surrender.

With every shred of willpower I made an upward grapple to the surface, fighting desperately to emerge from this watery grave. After what seemed an interminable struggle, my head finally broke the surface as I thrashed around to stay on top of the violent swells. I greedily sucked in huge gasps of life-giving air. My lungs expanded as I inhaled the oxygen deeply; I thought I would never get enough of it. After only three gasps of air I was forced under again. Choking and coughing up a mouthful of salty water I'd just inhaled, I managed to resurface once more.

Time began to move again! The sea drove me tirelessly, continually breaking upon me, not allowing a minute's recuperation. As if my pleas had been heard, after a short span of trying to dodge a series of slamming waves, they eventually passed, leaving me in relatively calm waters. This gave me a moment to recover before the next sequence of waves formed. Now that the imminent danger of drowning had passed, at least for a moment, I had to find the bunca before the next surge of water came hammering down on

me. I flayed out my arms, frantically propelling myself around and around scanning the ocean. It was nowhere to be seen!

Attempting to thrust myself out of the water to gain some height, I tried to see over the waves. Arrows of paralyzing fear shot through me—what if I couldn't find it? Blinding salty water stung my eyes, making my task almost impossible. My legs felt like sodden weights, but with sheer determination I commanded them to continue treading water while I searched. A tremendous sense of relief flooded through me as I suddenly caught sight of the bunca about twenty yards away. Oh my God, it looked so far. Would I have the strength to make it?

I felt the thrill of accomplishment as my link to survival came within arm's length. I lurched forward and grasped hold of one of the outriggers. The relief I felt was beyond description. Hoisting myself up onto the overturned hull, I wrapped my arms tightly around it as I would a long-lost friend I thought I'd never see again. My bunca was the thin thread attaching me to life. This fragile instrument stood between me and the gaping jaws of death—my only ally in a ruthless sea and my last remnant of security. To lose the bunca would be certain death; of that I had no illusions. The relief I experienced at finding the bunca was short-lived, however. I'd barely had time to recover from the horror of the boat capsizing, when I had to deal with the onset of another dilemma.

The seconds ticked by as I precariously hung onto the outrigger. I calmly registered the sight of my belongings as they emerged from under the bunca and bobbed to the surface. I spotted my green sarong swaying to the movement of the ocean. *'Should I swim after it? No, I won't need it now anyway'*, I thought nonchalantly. I was held captive in a trance-like state by the spectacle of my apricot string bag rupturing the surface, then spewing its contents out into the open sea.

I took a mental inventory of what I did or didn't need. *'Mangoes . . . no. Sunscreen . . . I really should try to save that, but I suppose it's not essential'*, I thought looking on helplessly as it sunk beneath the water and out of reach. My plastic bottle of water bobbing to the surface snapped me out of my daze, transporting me back to the grim reality of my situation. *'Oh, there's the water. I'd better get that.'* Holding onto the outrigger with one hand I leaned over to grasp the bottle, but it was out of my grasp.

"Grab the flippers!" a booming loud voice forcefully instructed me.

It was not a suggestion but a command: Any vestiges of doubt I had previously held about to whom the voice belonged were immediately squashed. An inner truth stronger than any logic told me it was YHWH. HE was with me! Although I had felt all along that I had somehow not been alone in the bunca, YHWH's voice now confirmed to me His presence with complete conviction. The confusion that had prevailed during the past twenty hours instantly dissolved. I felt as if I was in His hands and would follow in faith any instruction He gave, no matter how illogical or ludicrous it seemed.

Naturally, doubt surfaced as to why I should save the flippers rather than the life-sustaining water. However, the authority of the voice left me no choice except to obey and not question the logic of it. I swam toward the flippers and retrieved them. I searched the surrounding water for the bunca. There it was, 20 yards to my right. Hugging both flippers to my chest, I rolled over onto my back and paddled toward it. Reaching out a trembling hand, I once again touched the wooden outrigger of the bunca that had become my lifeline. I had come to think of this as my home base; I was only safe when connected to it. Giving myself a few minutes to rest, I wrapped a rigid arm around the outrigger.

Putting the flippers on was job number one right now; besides, I needed to have my arms free if I was to right the bunca. The battering of the waves against me was making it difficult to hold onto the boat and the flippers. I knew if I didn't hurry I would lose hold of one of them. With one arm looped around the outrigger for support, I held one flipper securely under my armpit and struggled with my left hand to put on the other flipper.

What I had imagined would be a relatively simple task turned into the most intensely tiring and frustrating ordeal, which left me totally exhausted, almost driving me to the brink of a complete breakdown. Every part of my mind and body felt as if it were being stretched out on a medieval rack, strained beyond endurance. The relentless pounding of the waves was as if the Inquisition's henchman tightened the winch one more notch, propelling me forcibly toward the invisible line where I just wanted to scream in utter frustration. I was caught in a vicious cycle of simultaneously battling the sea, holding onto the bunca, and trying to put on the flippers. Every time I almost succeeded in getting the flipper on, an angry swell of furious water would crash against the bunca wrenching it out of my grip, while the other flipper wedged under my armpit would also escape my clutches and be taken off on the crest of a wave.

It seemed I was fighting a losing battle, but with the courage and determination I knew I possessed, I kept on struggling. I began to retaliate against my enemy, which had ensnared me in this watery death trap. This anger furnished me with the energy I needed. I spent the next half hour struggling against the perpetual onslaught of waves in my bid to get the flippers on, but I eventually succeeded! The flippers were both on. My arms were free. Now I could now turn my attention to righting the bunca. I heaved a sigh of relief. With both flippers securely on my feet, I suddenly felt grateful for the small measure of protection and propulsion they gave me. Although I was tired to the very depths of my soul, I felt an underlying strength beginning to rise in me at the prospect of being back cocooned in the safety of the bunca in just a few short minutes.

Every part of me hungered for the oblivion of sleep, but I needed to right the bunca first and climb inside to circumvent my one-to-one combat with the sea. Thank God, it would be only a matter of minutes before I was safe and able to sleep. All I'd have to do then is wait to be rescued. My heart began to beat a little faster as the reality of this task sunk in. It was now or never! I began drawing in a series of extremely large gulps of air, filling my lungs to capacity until I felt like a helium balloon that would fly away if not anchored.

I plunged down into a huge swell of water. It took some moments to focus my eyes in the salty water which I was becoming accustomed to. Placing myself strategically with arms

outstretched I grasped the rim on either side of the upturned hull. With every ounce of my strength I heaved upward. It didn't budge, not even one inch! It felt as if it were bolted to the sea by a ton of concrete. I was instantly stricken with confusion. My mind was racing. *'What on earth was happening? Why wouldn't it move?'*

I was running out of air. I would have to resurface and try again. Breathing out the last remnants of shallow breath, my head broke the surface as I gulped greedily at the abundant fresh air. *I can't give up. 'There must be another way to turn it over,'* I thought. Steeling myself for another attempt, I thrust myself under the water as deep as I could go, then began an upward surge to try to drive the bunca out of the water by sheer force. I was grateful for the extra power and precision the flippers gave me. My legs thrashed wildly back and forth propelling me towards the surface. I turned my face upward and saw the pale glow of the sun illuminating the water, making the shape of the bunca visible. I was hurtling upward like a torpedo; any fraction of a second now the ramming contact of my body against the bunca would send it toppling over.

Crunch! The force with which I hit the bunca sent me reeling. My body twisted violently under the jamming impact. I felt my wrists crack as they were wrenched backwards. Searing pain shot up my arms like steel darts. My mouth fell open in gasping shock as the air was expelled from my mouth and water rushed in, filling the gap. I felt the stirrings of panic. The ocean had claimed my bunca, holding it captive in a vacuum deadlock. The delicate thread that held me to life was directly linked to that bunca. I knew that I would never have the strength to turn over the bunca.

Oh GOD, what am I to do? Please tell me, I prayed.

Dragging myself out of the water, I clambered up onto the hull and immediately slid off the other side. My second attempt was just as futile. The hull of the bunca was covered with a film of slimy green algae, making the surface extremely slippery. Could I maneuver myself under the hull? The thought of being half submerged beneath the water gave me the impetus to find another alternative. I tried sitting on the bar that connected the outrigger to the hull, with my legs dangling into the water. With one arm pressed firmly against the hull, I gripped the outrigger with the other.

Seconds before contact, I swiveled around to see the menace of a towering slope of water heading straight for me. *Oh no, not again!* It was too late to get out of its path. I braced myself, sucked in a large breath, and prayed. The wave had gathered such momentum and height that when I looked for the last time it was a horrifying twelve-foot tall. A mountainous deluge of water smashed against my back with such force that it felt as if I had fallen off a ten-story building and landed flat onto my back. That pain was replaced by a swirling, tumbling, gyrating feeling, like being a sock in the washing machine, as I was caught up in the hellish thrashing of the ocean. Round and round I went in a fetal position until I was too dizzy to know which way was up. *'Oh stop! Give me a break, please. I can't stand this anymore; I have no strength left to fight you,'* I begged the sea, which had become my enemy.

Fighting to rise to the surface yet again, I wiped the salt water from my eyes and located the bunca and swam toward it. I tried an endless variation of positions until I found one,

although extremely uncomfortable, that would anchor me to the bunca and enable me to stay alive. Varying the first position, I found that if I sat with my legs scissored on the bar between the upturned hull and the outrigger, I could manage to hang on despite the weight of the waves crashing over me. At long last I felt marginally secure. I breathed in a great sigh of relief; I was still alive! It was as much as I could hope for right now.

Like the petals of a flower, I opened myself up to the rays of the early morning sun and absorbed like a sponge the healing touch it transmitted. Although the sun seemed rather weak, the warming caresses of heat against my skin began to thaw my frozen body and balm my tortured mind. With the warmth and light from the dawning of a new day I felt my hope and strength returning, and the feeling of complete desolation slowly dissolved. I reevaluated my situation. Piece by piece I formed a realistic picture and made a mental note of my resources and how to utilize these to my advantage. I knew without a doubt that by now people would be out searching for me. My main objective was to hold on to the boat and stay alive until they arrived.

As I looked over the infinite stretch of ocean, the island of Panay was now barely visible. Thank God, I could still see it even if it was so very far away, probably about twenty nautical miles. It was now just a shadowy bluish haze on the distant horizon. Heavy mist clung to the mountainous regions of Panay, endowing them with a mystical aura. It was with utter disbelief that I realized how far I had been carried out. Was there any chance at all I could paddle back? I doubted it. The expanse of water was endless and becoming even greater as the currents rapidly moved me farther away with every passing minute. Between here and there stretched billions of tons of water and hundreds and thousands of waves, all working against me.

Realistically, it was physically impossible for me to paddle all the way back to Panay, but maybe by making an effort I would be moving closer to my rescuers. If I allowed myself to just drift at the alarming speed I was moving, I would end up so far out to sea that rescue teams wouldn't even consider searching in the vicinity. Besides I couldn't sit here and wallow in destructive self-pity. I had to occupy myself with action. I believed fighting for my life was better than dying in wait. With the extra propulsion I gained from the flippers I sat on the outrigger and paddled with gusto. I drove myself tirelessly! Although the series of rushing waves colliding with me made my progress almost ineffective, my stubborn streak of determination willed me to go on.

I rolled my tongue around the inside of my mouth to summon some saliva. It had become as parched and arid as the Sahara Desert. Bitter salt now stung my cracked lips and seared into my burnt skin like a branding iron. My mind turned to the delicious thought of water, of cooling liquid sliding down my throat. I would soak it up like blotting paper. *'Oh, why didn't I save my water bottle instead of the flippers? That would have made more sense'*, I berated myself. No, I was more than pleased to have the flippers reassuringly on my feet. Not only did they protect me from any hungry fish that decided I looked like food, but they aided me through the water. Anyway, the instructions from YHWH's voice didn't tell me to save the water; the flippers were deemed more valuable.

I endured this painstaking feat for an hour or so until a deep form of paralysis set into my legs, then I was forced to stop. The muscles in my legs were seized by an intense, burning, cramp-like sensation. Tears of pure frustration, helplessness, and agonizing pain

welled up in my eyes. I bowed my head in despair. My body was betraying me; maybe it knew better than I how futile my attempt really was. The thought of spending another endless, petrifying night in this watery hell was more than I could stand.

A cold sense of defeat began to fill me. It was hopeless! The likelihood of my getting back to Panay was crushed by the stark truth. But in finally acknowledging my own limitations, I was seized with a thought: over seven thousand islands made up the Philippines. I reasoned that if I let myself drift with the currents instead of opposing them, surely, I would eventually drift to one of them. There seemed little other choice. This last fragment of hope kept the candle of my faith dimly burning.

Maneuvering the bunca around, I looked out into the direction the currents were taking me. I strained my eyes to see the peak of an island on the ocean's landscape. The daunting sight of not a single stretch of land as far as the eye could see, sent a cold premonition through me. I had now surrendered myself to the unpredictable nature of the sea. I'd given up my fight! I was at its mercy, heading on a lethal course to nothing and nowhere.

I was filled with a yearning so deep to see my mother that it physically pained me. Like hard blows to my gut, I winced every time I thought of her. Where was she? She should have realized I was missing by now, lost at sea, so where was she? Her maternal instinct must surely alert her that I'm in grave danger, that this is an emergency. She knew me too well; we were too close for her not to know that my day's outing on the ocean had gone terribly wrong. If I had been with anyone else I could understand them not responding immediately, but not my mother. I fought hard to fathom what had gone wrong at her end. Was there some blockage that she couldn't receive my cry for help? I had been frantically sending her messages, hoping somehow to signal her, to alert the warning button inside her and every mother that her child was in danger.

Even though I was an adult now and she was no longer responsible for me, I still believed as a mother her internal button would always be switched on; instinctively she would always be on guard to look out for and protect me. Why then had this link failed at the time I needed her most? I swayed between feeling helpless and out of control, to being so incredibly angry that the acid it produced was burning a hole in the lining of my stomach. I was alone with no help in sight.

The blazing sun was now high in the sky, illuminating my surroundings with no sight of land on any horizon. This realization kept slapping me with ferocity. Rescue would come; it had to! How could a foundation of dreams, thoughts, and memories be washed away in a moment of time, never to be recaptured, never to be relived? It didn't seem feasible that my twenty-two years on this earth could be terminated by a killer wave, wiped out like chalk on a blackboard. I had left no legacy, no husband, and no descendants. The only thing to remember me by would be a pile of photos; my poor family wouldn't even have a grave to visit to keep my memory alive. I wondered how my sisters Angeline and Natalie would cope with losing their big sister. After a time, it would seem as if I had never existed. Who was Michelle Hamilton? What did she achieve in this world worthy of remembrance? What sort of person was she? Only a handful of people would be able to say, I knew Michelle!

At this moment I had enough self-pity to drown myself in. Never had I felt so sorry for myself, and annoyingly I knew it was all my own making. Sheer stupidity had brought me to this destination of terror, on the crossroads between life and death. I'd been recklessly taunting destiny since I'd been a child, and now I was paying my dues. The currents and the waves were lethal adversaries. My destiny hung in the balance! Mum was the only person who could tip the scales in my favor; otherwise it was all over for me. I would not allow myself to die easily—my will to live was too intense—but if I was being truly honest with myself, I knew my chances of making it through another day, much less another night, were a million to one.

The sea had abducted me. Who would have the power to set me free?

THE DAY OF PIERCING TORMENT - 8

RACHELLE ... 8:25AM FRIDAY, MARCH 10 BORACAY ISLAND

The blazing sun had already transformed the island into a gigantic, sizzling hotplate. The torrid storm of last night now seemed illusionary. The beach was relatively deserted, except for a huddle of Filipino men setting up their stalls for the day's trading.

"Excuse me; do you know where I can find the Coast Guard?" I asked in deliberately well-pronounced English.

"You must report to Mr. Gonzales, the radio controller. Then he will take you to the Coast Guard. You will find him in the bungalow behind you," one man answered, pointing.

"Thank you," I said, hurrying off in that direction.

Feeling hot and out of breath, I staggered up the few steps into the bungalow which was used for a radio room and blurted out, "I want to report a missing person! I need a search party as soon as possible. My daughter went out in a bunca yesterday and hasn't come home yet."

It was official! I had spoken the dreaded words out loud; they had now shifted from speculative thought into concrete reality. The inner conflicts of doubt had been eliminated and the feared truth now spoken aloud. My daughter was missing, lost at sea!

"Please come and sit down," a uniformed gentleman offered. "I will need to get some details from you." I sank into the chair proffered.

"What's your daughter's full name and nationality?"

"Michelle Hamilton. She's an Australian citizen."

"How old is she and what was she wearing when last seen?"

"She's twenty-two and had on a blue and white striped bikini and blue shorts."

"Could you describe the boat she was in?"

"It was a small green and red bunca, with outriggers. We rented it from Willy's Beachfront Cottages yesterday morning."

"Ohhh! And when did you realize she was missing?"

"Well, I was very concerned last night when she didn't come home, but by that time it was already dark, and I wasn't entirely sure she was missing. There was a possibility that she could have been on the other side of the island and I didn't want to raise the alarm until I was positive. But this morning I went out and searched the island and couldn't find her. It was then I knew for definite," I said, my voice trailing off.

"Where are you staying?"

"Look, I know you have to know these things, but can't you get the search underway? All these questions are wasting valuable time. How many blonde twenty-two-year-olds floating in a bunca will you find out there? Please hurry," I insisted, as I struggled to maintain an outward calm.

"First, I must take you to report to my superior. He's in charge and will know what to do."

"You mean you're not Mr. Gonzales and I've just wasted all this time telling you?" I asked in disbelief. "Please take me immediately to the person who can authorize a search. Time is so precious!"

"Yes, ma'am, I do understand. Please come with me."

Following him along the sandy tracks through the lazy palm trees, I felt as if I had entered the mystical terrain of the world of Alice in Wonderland where everything seemed unreal. In silence I traced his steps winding through a maze. Behind the tourist facade lay a small village, its bamboo bungalows cocooned in lush vegetation. This was a part of the island not usually seen by tourists but inhabited by the locals. Mothers, squatting in colorful sarongs, bathed bare-bottomed children whose wet skins glistened in the morning sunlight.

The village was a hive of buzzing, productive activity. Chickens and ducks ran free over the earth, scratching out morsels of food. We were obliged to move aside as a huge bullock lumbered slowly along the path, fettered to logs of wood destined for new construction. At another time, this spectacle would have been a priceless experience, but in these grave circumstances, I wasn't able to appreciate it. I had only one thought which obliterated all others: to get the search underway as soon as possible.

We climbed the steps of a sparsely furnished bungalow. My eyes were immediately drawn to the radio equipment. Communication! I felt instant relief to have a link with the outside world. Finally, something positive could be done. But the place was deserted!

"Please sit down and I will go and find Mr. Gonzales."

I mutely obeyed him by sitting down, feeling alienated in the unfamiliar atmosphere. The pent-up frustration I was experiencing bore a crushing weight from which there was no escape. *'Why can't they hurry? Where is everybody?'* Too anxious to remain seated, I began pacing the room. Back and forth I paced, trying to relieve the unbearable uncertainty and impending doom that had settled over me. Hearing footsteps outside, I moved toward the door.

"Hello, I'm Pedro," a tall man said as he entered. "I'm told your daughter is missing. Please come and sit down over here and tell me exactly what's happened." His professional manner inspired confidence.

"My daughter Michelle went out yesterday in a bunca she hired and hasn't come home yet. I want a rescue team sent out immediately, do you understand?" I pleaded.

"Yes, ma'am, I do understand your concern, but first I need some information from you."

"But I've already spent ten minutes of valuable time telling the other man everything I could," I said, getting very irritated with their drawn-out procedures.

Speaking at the speed of an express train, I once again related the events of the previous day, giving him all the relevant information. "Where she was last sighted?" he asked in a methodical voice that made me want to scream.

"I last saw her heading off toward the southernmost tip of Boracay at about 11:30am yesterday."

"Mmmm," he said, digesting the information. I caught an expression of concern play across his face, which he immediately masked, continuing in his official capacity.

"There is a very strong current at this time of year which could have carried the bunca out toward Panay. I think it would be best if we started searching in that general area."

"I'll trust your judgment. You know the territory better than I do. But how long will it take to get the search underway?" I asked him with mounting anxiety.

"Please calm yourself, ma'am. We will do everything as quickly as possible. Now that I have the correct information, we will dispatch the rescue team."

At last the tedious paper work had been completed. I rose with trepidation knowing the burden of responsibility had been transferred to his shoulders. I felt as if I had relinquished control of the situation, this act rendering me virtually impotent. Like a dog following his master, I found myself blindly trudging down the pathway that led towards the beach. An opening of palm trees offered an open window to the ocean, and an innocent patch of blue water appeared as we made our way towards the sea. I cast my eyes around and all beauty seemed erased from the scene before me. How could something that usually instilled such peace in me now be the instrument of such anguish and suffering?

As I stepped out from the thick wall of palm trees, the glistening expanse of white shimmering beach burned my eyes. Squinting from the glare, I saw directly in front of us a boat painted with bright red lettering, Sea Rescue.

"The crew is on their way. Now we should be able to have the rescue underway in about ten minutes," the official voice broke into my silence. Waiting, waiting—it's all I seemed to do.

I turned to confront the ocean. As far as the eye could see was a velvety blanket of blue merged into azure skies on the hazy distant horizon, the two elements blended into one forming a complete blue splendor. The vast watery landscape stretched out forever. Would they ever be able to find her out there? The magnitude of the ocean now seemed horrendous. My eyes stung with unshed tears as the scene before me misted over.

"Excuse me, ma'am, Captain Alfonso would like to speak to you," said a young man.

"Oh, of course" I muttered as the words shattered through into the depth of my abysmal thoughts.

"Mr. Gonzales told me that your daughter is missing, and the last time you saw her was yesterday morning. Is that correct?" Captain Alfonso asked.

"Yes, it was around eleven o'clock. She was heading in the direction of the southernmost tip of the island."

"Can you describe the boat? Were there any distinctive markings?"

"I'm sorry, but all I can remember is it was about seven feet long, painted red and green, with outriggers but no sail."

"Is there anything else you can tell us that would be helpful in the search?"

"No, not that I can think of," I said apologetically, realizing my information was rather sketchy. "Please find her for me, please." I heard my voice quavering. His eyes showed compassion as he patted my hand, reassuring me that he would do all he could.

With that he turned to instruct his crew as several men began to drag the boat down to the water's edge. The solemn faces of the crew conveyed a thousand unspoken words. I was bathed in the sympathetic collective gaze they bestowed upon me. I watched in silence, my heart twisting as if it were being wrenched out of its cavity. *'Please bring her back to me'*, I prayed fervently as I watched the men put the boat to sea.

I turned away and began walking back to the radio room but suddenly found my legs wouldn't carry me. My limbs crumpled under me as I fell onto the soft, warm sand. Strong arms were instantly at my side raising me up. With a stumbling gait I was helped back to the office.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" a gentle voice asked.

"Yes, please."

Feeling slightly revived, and knowing the boats were out, I dug deeply into my reservoir of strength, piecing back together the tattered shreds of my emotions. Mr. Gonzales had left me in the care of the radio operator who was endeavoring to contact Manila to report the incident. Staccato beeps and static waves from the radio transmitter filled the room. A pretty, young Filipino girl spoke into the mike, repeating the same coded message, earnestly seeking a reply. My raw nerves were pierced by the sounds of the high-pitched frequency. The static was interrupted by the sound of a feeble voice.

A flicker of hope returned as I asked, "Have you managed to contact Manila?"

"No, it's Lotti, who is stationed at our other transmitter."

I was stricken by confusion. "You mean to say Manila hasn't even been contacted yet?"

"No, I'm sorry, but we only have an amateur transmitter which is not powerful enough to reach Manila. As we don't have a direct line, first we must contact Caticlan, the station on Panay Island, which will then relay the message through to Manila."

I felt my heart plummet as I realized the painstaking procedure we would have to go through and the loss of time which was so critical "How long do you think this will take?"

"It's hard to say, but Lotti, who is our most experienced operator, has been informed and is already trying to contact the Australian Embassy."

"Your embassy will be more equipped to help you organize that, but I know Joshua has already notified Caticlan, and their fishing fleet has been alerted to look out for her. Also the fishermen have sent out several other boats so there's more than one searching. I know this ordeal must be terrible for you. We are all doing the best we can; I'm sure your daughter will be found."

"That's a consolation! But one solitary boat searching out there is just not enough. I want more boats and a plane or helicopter looking for her. I don't care how much it costs! I know there is a large American base in Manila. Surely they must have planes and helicopters at their disposal."

Somewhere outside of myself I was aware of other people milling around, whispering in respectful, sensitive undertones. But my whole being was solely attuned to the radio which represented hope, help, and my only link to the outside world. I felt as if I were adrift on a deserted island, surrounded by a sea of isolation, completely severed from anything familiar, in never-never land. I desperately needed to speak to my embassy, someone I could relate to, whose authority I could rely on to get a full-scale search operational.

Rising from my feelings of helplessness, I naively clung to the belief that one word from the seat of embassy power would command a fleet of helicopters to search the sea and save one of their own. I was infuriated by the seemingly fruitless conversations between bases, none of which had extended beyond the island. I could feel the pressure building up

in me. Like the bubbles in a champagne bottle surging upward to the surface, I felt that if I didn't get out of that room I would explode.

"Where can I find Lotti? Is she in walking distance from here?" I said, reasoning to myself I may as well speak directly to her, at least that would eliminate one link in the connection to Manila.

"She is not far from here. Sonia will take you there if you like," the dispatcher said, "I'll continue here and try to establish a contact."

Thank goodness I thought, as I left the tiny room and headed down that dreaded stretch of beach. The sun was hidden behind misty clouds; the fact that it wasn't blazing hot was a blessing. I reasoned if Michelle was still afloat at least she wouldn't be getting too burnt. Images of Michelle adrift out there, her bare skin burning under the scorching heat was a private hell for me.

The ten-minute walk from one end of the beach to Lotti's house seemed an eternity. The island had sprung to life. A migration of people sauntered toward the sea armed with towels, beach chairs, and other assorted paraphernalia. The ocean was dotted with windsurfers, sailboats, and swimmers. The exuberant holiday atmosphere that I witnessed about me was in sharp contrast to the chaotic activity within me. We arrived at Lotti's place where the radio equipment was housed upstairs in a tiny room. Rafael Gelito, son of the proprietor of the Willy's bungalows and owner of the bunca Michelle had gone out in, was also at Lotti's.

"I'm so sorry to hear about Michelle," Rafael said emotionally.

"I want you to know that we have sent out several boats from here. My father has gone out as well. He said he will stay out if it takes to find her, and he's going to search the outer islands. It's possible she may have drifted out there. Don't give up hope. We are all praying for her safe return. Lotti is upstairs trying to contact the mainland for you. Come on, I'll take you up to her."

I nodded mutely, feeling my throat constrict with emotion as I followed him up the narrow wooden stairs. He introduced me to Lotti, who smiled warmly as she continued repeating the S.O.S. message into the radio. As Rafael headed back to the restaurant, he squeezed my hand, imparting understanding. His lashes were wet with tears of empathy, but there was nothing left that he could do.

Lotti was a wonderfully warm young woman with compassionate eyes and demeanor.

"I've been on the radio ever since I heard Michelle was missing, but I'm having a lot of trouble getting through," she admitted apologetically. "I think I'll have to go to another base and see if I can get a better reception from there."

"You mean the office where I have just come from?" I asked, not believing what I was hearing.

"Yes, the signal may be clearer from there. This must seem like a terribly inadequate procedure, but we're only amateur radio operators, and there is no official connection to the mainland," she apologized.

"It's not your fault, but it's my daughter out there and all this time being wasted is unbearable. I need to get a plane out looking. If I don't ..."

A lump rose in my throat and a flood of emotions suddenly overwhelmed me. It could cost Michelle her life. This time I was unable to withstand the impact. Racking sobs rose up from their forced imprisonment, spilling over like a burst dam. At that moment I did not believe I could go on.

Within minutes we were yet again pacing that well-trodden path. Just two nights ago Michelle and I were carousing down this very track laughing and bursting with happiness. *Don't think of it, my mind warned. Blank your mind. It's the only way you'll get through this and remain sane,* I inwardly shouted, trying to drown out my fear.

The sound of a voice over the transmitter snapped me into the present.

"Boracay, are you receiving me?"

"Yes, go ahead," Lotti answered.

"We have a Mr. George Frazer from the Australian Embassy standing by. He's in the radio office in Manila and wants to confirm where the missing person is from. Is the mother there with you now?"

"Yes, Ms. Hamilton is here with us. She says she's from Sydney, over." She looked at me intently.

I heard the voice of the operator relay what Lotti had said to Mr. Frazer in Manila. My heart leapt into my throat as I heard the unmistakable Australian accent crackle through the transmitter: "Ask Ms. Hamilton if she is okay and if we can be of assistance. Is there anything she needs?"

Leaping from the chair, I took hold of the receiver as relief flowed through me like cool spring water on a searing hot day. Every cell in my body became alert. Everything was finally going to be okay. I had been thrown a life line; someone from home knew of our predicament, could share the burden, and could actively help. I felt confident that with embassy authority, this place would be swarming with rescue equipment within the hour.

Gripping the receiver tightly, I said, "Mr. Frazer, I do need your help. I need a plane or a helicopter over here to search for my daughter. What can you do to help me get them?"

"Boracay, this is Caticlan. Sorry Manila can't hear you direct, but I will relay your message through. Stand by, over."

And I stood there with my heart pounding as I heard the operator repeat my message with none of the desperation with which I had uttered it. Mr. Frazer's voice came on the line. It was annoying that we could hear him direct, but he could not hear us.

"Tell Ms. Hamilton that we are extremely distressed to hear of the situation but unfortunately we do not have planes or these types of resources at our disposal. There is

nothing we could do to help in that regard. Could you please find out what has already been done in the way of a search?" he said, being brutally frank.

My relief and expectations were crushed by his devastating words; each one fell on me as if bearing a great weight. Then I responded, with emphasis on each word. "There are only a few boats out looking for her now. Without a plane the chances of finding Michelle are like looking for a needle in a haystack. Tell Mr. Frazer I need a plane today and I don't care what it costs. Can he suggest where I might be able to hire one? Anything will do!" I slumped back, waiting for my message to be relayed.

"You could try Air Pacific. They may be able to assist. They have a small fleet that services the islands and may be willing to let you hire one. At present I can't think of anyone else who may be able to help. However, we have notified the Manila Coast Guard, and all fishing vessels within the area are being alerted. Would you ask if there is anyone in Australia she wishes us to contact for her?"

Lotti removed the transmitter from my lap where I had consciously let it fall, having no further use for it. There seemed no point in prolonging the conversation. If he couldn't help me, what was there left to say? Lotti looked into my eyes, seeking my answer to his question. I heard myself say,

"No, there's nobody I want to contact, nobody....."

"Please keep us informed of the situation. We will be standing by, over."

For some minutes I sat immobilized in the chair, unable to think. I felt as if I were suspended, caught in a limbo of unspeakable doom. I centered my thoughts on a clear space in my mind just above the heavy black veils of grief, not being able to absorb this shocking new information. No plane! It was too appalling to believe. Every atom of hope and faith I owned hung precariously on the premise that getting a plane to search for Michelle was the only real chance she had of being found. However, I couldn't allow myself to become overwhelmed by this latest diabolical news. There was still Michelle to think of and if by some miracle she was still alive, this was not the time to give up. It was the time to fight!

ANGELIC ENCOUNTER -9

MICHELLE . . . 6:00 PM FRIDAY MARCH 10 CUYO EAST PASSAGE

Hues of amber and russet bronzed the sky as the sun made its final plunge. Its extraordinary beauty simply intensified my pain. Romantic couples would most probably be sitting on the beaches of Boracay at this very moment, viewing the sunset with appreciation, blissfully unaware that this identical sunset was the cause of such terror and despair to another human being. Darkness would soon fall upon the face of the earth, blanketing me in an inky blackness. My heart was wrenched with a savage despair as I contemplated how I would physically and mentally get through another night. A decision needed to be made! Would I fight to survive until the last remaining breath was left in my body, or should I give up the struggle now?

It was now painfully obvious that rescue was not coming. I had been abandoned and knowing that hurt me more than anything else I had experienced. It far surpassed the physical pain that afflicted me. What possible reason could there be for her not to have come to my rescue by now? Last night was understandable; I rationalized that she had probably thought me to be on the other side of Boracay Island. By the time she would have realized that this was not the case, it would have been too dark to search for me. So I had hung onto life with a vengeance throughout the night because I had no doubt that at first light Mum would have rescue boats out looking for me. I had been sadly mistaken. There was only one thing I now knew with utter certainty and could guarantee would happen: Night would fall and I would be left alone to face another twelve hours of horrendous anguish.

"Why? Why? Why is this happening to me?" I called out to YHWH. "I'm not a murderer, or a thief or go around committing evil I cried out to into the night sky. I believe I've been a good person in my life. Kind and generous, I go out of my way to help my fellow man. I never intentionally inflict pain on others, either physically or emotionally. So why me? Surely I don't warrant this kind of treatment. If I am being punished, I would sincerely like to know the reason. Are you listening to me?" I called out angrily as my last vestige of control evaporated.

"If it's you who is handing down this undeserved punishment, then I'll never understand you. Do you hear me? Never! Is this your idea of justice? Because it's certainly not mine! You know, if I wasn't so terrified of what other hideous surprises you might have in store for me, like being eaten by a shark, I would be saying even more."

Without warning, flashbacks of my life came unbidden to my mind like machine gun fire, and the memories were disturbing and shameful. So many scenes of myself as a party girl flooded my mind; dancing and drinking till all hours at nightclubs till I was too drunk to stand, staggering home with my shoes in my hand and a half-eaten kebab. That's if I made it home, many times I woke up in a guy's bed that I had just met at the nightclub.

One by one the pictures reeled off like the clicking of a kaleidoscope; my boyfriend arriving home with a rental car that he had stolen, telling me to hurriedly pack up our stuff as we were leaving Perth for Sydney that day. Scared, yet exhilarated I did what he said, and we spent 3 days driving across the Nullabour plains of outback Australia to Sydney. Once there

we rented an apartment but did not know what to do with the car, so we left it parked in the allocated car space of the block of apartments. I suggested driving the car into the bush and setting fire to it to hide the evidence. But we decided against that idea. Time passed, and we thought we had gotten away with it, and then one day the police arrived at the place we both worked and arrested us for fraud and grand theft auto. Fortunately, my boyfriend took the blame as it was his idea and I did not get a criminal conviction. However, that was the end of our relationship as he was deported back to America.

The bingeing and purging - that was my dirty little secret. As my stomach burned out here in the ocean it was not just from the salt water that irritated it but the fact that I had arrived on Boracay island with a stomach ulcer from my battle with alcohol and bulimia.

Suddenly I am taken back to the day where I am lying on the table at an abortion clinic in Thailand, a one-night stand, an unwanted pregnancy, a problem I felt I could hide forever, but now that memory was emblazoned on my mind. A small voice inside my heads asks, *'Isn't that murder?'* I hung my head in shame and realized what a wretched person I was after all! Here I was enraged that God would dare to let such a terrible ordeal like this happen to such a good person like myself; but all the flashbacks reminded me how very far from the truth that was. So what was going to happen to me now?

As I hovered near death I began ironically to question the meaning of life. Are we ever really in control of our own lives or are we just pawns in a divine plan? I wondered. I began delving down unexplored avenues of thought, searching for some answers to these age-old mysteries. If our lives are not preordained, then why are we led down certain paths and arrive at destinations that seem in retrospect laced with more than mere coincidences that seem not just our own making or choice? If there is not a prepared place for our souls to go after our bodies have expired, then what is the purpose of life here on earth? The trials and tribulations we suffer would be in vain, totally meaningless. As a person, I therefore had to believe that we have been put on this earth for a reason; otherwise nothing made sense. Why would we all have been given a conscience and the discernment to know the difference between right and wrong if there was no consequence to avoid or reward to strive for? There would be no reason to try to be a good and moral person if there is no heaven or hell.

I had heard the audible voice of YHWH speak to me several times, giving me instructions to prolong my life, but to what end? Wouldn't it be kinder of HIM to take me now if my time was up instead of letting me linger on in this living hell? Was I going to be the culmination of a supernatural miracle, or would my death just be a senseless loss? If the latter were true, then His reasoning and wisdom were totally beyond my comprehension. I had so many questions that now required a response. I had always accepted these unexplainable tragedies as being the way life was, but with my death so imminent I felt a desperate need to have the answers revealed to me. Perhaps these things are only unveiled to us once we die and go to either heaven or hell. I speculated that if I didn't make it through the night, then maybe my questions would be answered sooner than I thought. Thinking about my life and the way I had lived it I obviously didn't deserve to go to heaven but nevertheless if I died out here now would I still be accepted. The ultimate question now burned in my mind. Heaven or hell, up or down, which way would I go?

My mum was Jewish but had married out of her faith to my step Dad who was Catholic, but not a practicing one. Mum was quite a spiritual person and talked about YHWH often, but she has did not attend the Synagogue. We did not go to any religious services as a family but for a while I went to Sunday school at my Dad's urging. My sisters also attended a Catholic primary school, but I didn't.

Suddenly, a scripture I remembered from the Sunday school I had attended for a while abruptly popped into my mind: ***I am the way, the truth and the life, no one enters the kingdom of heaven except by me.*** I was astounded I had remembered a scripture from way back when I was a young girl. *'I had a knowing that the scripture referred to Jesus. Can that be true? I wondered. Was Jesus the way to heaven?'*

I was thunderstruck by how very limited my knowledge of spiritual matters was and how very little importance I had placed upon seeking the truth—until now. So absorbed had I been in the frivolity of life that it hadn't for one moment occurred to me that no one knew the hour of their death, and I had been caught completely unaware and totally unprepared. In the exuberance and gaiety of my fun-filled holiday on a tropical paradise, how could I ever have known that death was waiting just around the corner, lurking in the shadows?

As if my inner struggles had been heard, the voice of Mum came rippling through the airways and whispered in my ears the words she had said to me in Singapore, only 5 days before this ordeal had begun. In retrospect, how ironic it had been for her to say words of this religious nature completely out of the blue. Had she had a premonition that I would soon find myself in a situation of utter desperation, my back against a wall with nowhere to turn?

Her voice came back to me with astounding clarity *"Michelle, while you were away in Japan I found the truth that I have spent the best part of my life searching for, and it has changed me dramatically. I discovered that while believing in YHWH was satisfying, I still felt unfulfilled and there were a great many things I didn't understand. The ultimate ingredient that was missing in my life was discovering who the Messiah is. It's Yahshua/Jesus! He is the one. I have gone through all the scriptures and He fulfilled 353 of them when he came to earth. He is the one with the key to unlocking the door to salvation and true peace."*

I listened to what Mum had said with reservations and doubt, but I didn't believe I had the right to ostracize her newfound religious beliefs. If it was a source of comfort to her, then I was truly happy for her. However, I personally didn't feel I needed a spiritual mentor in my life; I thought I was managing perfectly well without religion.

Without wishing to offend Mum, I explained my point of view: *"I am pleased that you have found the missing piece of the puzzle at this stage of life. Right now it's obviously something you need, and I respect that; but I would appreciate it if you didn't preach your newfound beliefs to me."*

Mum had only smiled. *"I certainly don't wish to preach to you, but there is something I would like you to know. I feel it is important and would appreciate your hearing me out. One day you may find yourself in circumstances beyond your control, when you are down*

on your knees and need help desperately but don't know where to turn. If you find yourself in trouble, know that YHWH is forever waiting for you to call upon Him for help. However, before someone can accept His help, it is sometimes necessary to bring that person to his knees and to break his self-reliance. In other words, you must be stripped of your independence and be humbled. I hope that life doesn't ever bring you that far down, but if it ever does, remember God always has His arms outstretched to you. He will help you if you ask with a humble heart."

The repetitive words now rung in my ears over and over again, *"Sometimes He may have to bring you to your knees..... To your knees . . . submit your will to His will ... cry out to Him with a humble heart."*

How significant these remarks now seemed to me. Without warning a flash of understanding shone in my mind, illuminating all the darkness and confusion. The truth became transparent, and I could see it as clearly as if it were written on a wall in black and white. I had stumbled upon a reason that I could logically accept for going through this ordeal. I realized that I hadn't been lost at sea and made to suffer such extreme mental and physical torment in vain. YHWH had a purpose in subjecting me to this trial. HE needed to bring me to my knees so that I would listen.

I could now see I had to be rendered powerless and brought to my knees before I would genuinely seek God's help and acknowledge my true weakness. I did not have control over life and death. I was made painfully aware that my total independence had been my own worst enemy. Now that all my other options had been eliminated, and I was totally at the mercy of God, I realized how much I needed Him. I was indeed a sinner in need of saving.

A vast silence reigned over the ocean. Looking up into the sky, my eyes strained to penetrate the inky blackness.

With humility I cried aloud to YHWH, "I really need to talk to You. Please be listening to me. I am sorry for all the terrible things I have done in my life and ask you to forgive me. I know I have been angry with You and thought and said things that I shouldn't have, but up until now I haven't been able to understand why this tragedy is happening to me. I have doubted Your wisdom, Your logic and reasoning, and I probably don't deserve Your help, but You are my only hope. I'm not asking for You to save my life. I just want You to answer one question."

I called out *"God if you are up there and listening, please tell me is my number up? Am I going to die?"* I waited in trepidation, not really expecting an answer, but at the same time terrified I would hear a Yes.

An incredibly powerful, loud audible voice, shattered the night air saying **"No, you are not going to die!"**

My human instinct was to immediately doubt what I had heard. In fear that it may not be true, I asked Him to repeat it. Once again I called out, *"Did You say I was not going to die?"*

"You will not die!" the same authoritative voice reiterated what He had said. This time the intensity was diminished; nevertheless, the words were formidable and full of conviction. I sat motionless, not wanting to break this intimacy that had taken place. I found it utterly staggering that the Creator of the universe had just spoken to me personally. I was riveted to the spot as I attempted to absorb the magnitude of what I had just experienced.

I knew in many cultures tradition stated that if you saved a person's life, then he was forever in your debt. In essence, your life from that point belonged to another. I wondered if an exchange system was also required by YHWH.

I called again, *"What do You want from me in return?"*

Again His imperious voice pierced the night. **"I want 100 percent of your faith in Me."**

"What?" I said, stupefied. Is that all, I thought?

It seemed impossible to believe that after saving my life this was all He asked of me. I thought the list of conditions would be endless. I was expecting Him to say, *'Michelle, you must give up any thought of marriage, enter a convent as a nun, or become a missionary and help the poor and needy.'* What He was asking me seemed all too simple and this disarmed me.

"Ok you have 100% percent of my faith!" I waited confidently half expecting a pat on the back for obediently complying with His wishes.

The firm reply I received shocked me into submission, and in an instant of time He showed me He was not someone to be taken lightly, but someone to be feared and held in awe because He had the ability to see into my mind and read my every thought. His stern response shook me to the core of my foundations.

He said, **"No, not 90% - I want 100% of your faith."**

He knew exactly what I had been thinking and how blasé I was in offering my faith. He had intercepted my thoughts with an opposing statement. This for me was absolute proof that God existed and knew my heart and mind intimately. An airy stillness met my words. His assurance that I would not die was all He chose to reveal to me. The rest was up to me, to act in faith and wait on His deliverance. I knew His promise was an act of grace; now I would have to rely on Him to perform a miracle, because that's what it would take! Knowing that the secrets of my heart were not hidden from HIM, I had the overwhelming desire to unburden myself to Him and make a pledge of obedience and absolute trust in Him—even though I had held off turning to Him until the eleventh hour.

"I want you to understand that these are not the ravings of a desperate person who will make any promise to save her life. Whatever you ask of me in the future I will do it without hesitation. If it takes me an eternity to repay this gift of life that you have given me, then I guarantee that I will."

I made a promise in the ocean to spend the rest of my life repaying this gift of life that he had given me in any way he told me to do so. For sure I would be telling everyone who listened that there is a God, that he is real, he knows where we are, what we are thinking and is ready to save and rescue us from every storm of life. Just 24 hours earlier I had been singing the U2 song 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for' and realizing that was true. Now fast forward 1 day later and the elusive search for the missing piece of the puzzle had been found. The mystery had been solved and I had found what I was looking for. How amazing that God had heard my questioning heart and had answered me. With ten hours of darkness looming before me, I realized it would be most daunting to remain faithful to my word.

The wind began its eerie howling. Its force had whipped up the ocean to white-capped swells which were illuminated by the light of the stars. The sea had taken on the image of a grotesque monster with its predatory actions of snarling and lashing at me with whip-like swiftness. It was like a medieval dragon whose tongue licked hungrily at the edges of the bunca, trying to swallow us both.

My defenseless body, which ached almost beyond my endurance, was a target for its violent onslaught. Although last night's storm had abated, the seas still raged out of control. The gigantic size of the waves had not yet ceased to amaze me. I had never experienced or seen waves of this magnitude. Wedging myself even more firmly between the upturned hull of the bunca and the arm of the outrigger, I hung on for dear life! I could not escape the ferocity of the squall and its seeming determination to break me. My only choice was to hold fast to God's promise and await the passing of time until morning. Looking at the treacherous conditions I was in, I was amazed at the gargantuan task HE would have to perform to keep me alive.

Without warning, I sensed something near me. Swiveling around in every direction I was confronted with only the dense blackness of the night. Suddenly surrounding me was an aura of magnetic, vibrating forces that electrically charged the air around me, so much so that I could tangibly feel it! Terrified, I tried to shrink into obscurity under the surface of the ocean. Up to my neck in water, with the acid taste of abject fear in my mouth, I waited, instinctively knowing I was about to experience a spiritual encounter.

Incredibly, before my eyes the vibrating energy took form, an effervescent movement massing together like molecules of light and materializing into the visible images of three angelic beings, not more than 20 yards from my bunca. Absolutely stunned and in awe, I was unable to move. I wanted to swim away from these intimidating spiritual beings. Closing my eyes, I tried to eliminate this vision, truly hoping that when I opened my eyes again the angels would be gone, and I would realize that this was just an apparition, a figment of my mind.

Opening my eyes again, I was assaulted with the truth: It was no apparition—I was in the presence of three angels. I experienced an eerie sensation as if the meeting of physical and spiritual beings was forbidden. Pure, blinding white light emanated from these three heavenly beings, which stood together on the surface of the ocean. Towering above the surface, they seemed to be about nine feet tall.

I looked to see if there was any division between the three of them and there was not. They appeared to be fused together as if the 3 were 1 and the 1 were 3. With my mouth open in awe and fear, I looked on at these angels that stood on the ocean in a very stoic stance until the white aura of light from them diffused and disappeared. There were heavenly men dressed in garments of white light and they had faces but not distinguishable features as the light that shone out of their eyes and faces was so bright that it obscured their faces. This light that shone from their presence was so brilliant and powerful that it illuminated the waters around them. After several minutes, the visual sight of the three angels dissolved; yet I continued to feel surrounded by what I can only describe as an electromagnetic force. A tingling sensation rippled up and down my back as I felt another angel directly behind me. Like a cloak it spread its wings and wrapped them around my body, totally enveloping me. Looking down I could see the clearly defined, but translucent, wings of the angel, looking very much like that of a enormously large dragonfly.

The wings of the angel were the most spectacular thing my eyes had ever beheld. Inside each brilliant, blindingly white beams of light that emanated from the wings was filled with all the colors of the rainbow. Like a majestic prism of crystal light. I was completely swathed in a protective covering. The angel was my defensive shield against the murderous ocean. I consciously knew its God-given mission was to keep a vigil throughout the night and guard me from the jaws of death. Although initially it was a chilling sensation to be in such proximity to supernatural beings, the eerie feeling soon dissipated, and for the first time since this ordeal began, I felt safe! I had an overwhelming sense of relief and comfort to know that God was watching over me. The light diffused from the wings of the angel and I was yet again in darkness, but I continued to feel its presence surrounding me throughout the night.

The thundering seas continued to pound my body mercilessly and yet I felt cocooned by the angelic covering God had provided. As if encased in a glass screen box, I viewed the tempest around me with a calm instilled in me that went beyond all human comprehension. The hours passed by so slowly. The ebony blackness enveloped me like a dense fog. It was impossible for me to pierce through the obscurity of darkness. Nothing broke up the monotony of indistinct color, only a smattering of stars shed light on the commotion surrounding me. What most frightened me was that I could unsuspectingly be within a few miles, maybe even yards of land, and pass it by during the night, never knowing. Only the night held the mysterious secrets, and its camouflage of opaque blackness concealed them from my eyes.

I was exhausted to the very depths of my soul! There wasn't a part of me that didn't ache. I desperately longed to lie in a bed, to stretch out and close my eyes, without the fear of banging my head on the bunca, becoming unconscious, and drowning. Despite The Almighty's hand upon me, I had to remain awake if I wanted to stay alive. An uncontrollable shivering had taken possession of my body, shaking it violently like the branches of a birch tree in a savage storm. There seemed no way I could get warmth back into my icy body. The winds gusting over the ocean penetrated me to my innermost core. Although I dreaded the very thought of it, I knew the only way to get out of the bitter wind was to submerge myself under water. Releasing my hold on the bunca, I allowed myself to slip beneath the inky depths with only my head bobbing above the ocean surface. Securely sandwiching myself in, with my back pressed hard against the hull of the upturned bunca and with my knees bent, I pushed the soles of my flippered feet firmly against the narrow wooden outrigger.

Like two negative forces repelling each other, I created a tension that kept me rigidly wedged in position. It was diabolical to know that I would have to remain in this position all night. There was nothing beneath me except water, and if I relaxed the pressure for even a second, I would fall beneath the depths. One nightmarish thought that reoccurred with petrifying reality was the very real threat of man-eating sharks. I was easy prey to any marauding predator. Their keen sense would alert them to my presence in their territorial waters. Seeing my flippered feet dangling in the ocean, they would move in for the kill. Without warning I would feel the shark's segregated teeth sink into the flesh of my calf, shaking his head from side to side in a feeding frenzy. I would desperately try to hold onto the bunca but would feel myself being dragged farther under the ocean.

I made a despairing attempt to expel these thoughts from my mind by substituting these imaginings with pleasant mental thoughts. I tried to picture myself running through a field of wild flowers, the sun streaming down on me, warming my body. It was hopeless! This beautiful image faded from my thoughts as quickly as I had conceived it. I could not dispel these ghastly thoughts and fears; they had become entrenched in my mind. Groping blindly in the dark, I speedily hauled myself up higher onto the bunca, drawing as much of my body as possible out of the water.

"Oh God, please let daybreak come soon. I can't stand this," I pleaded aloud.

This night seemed to last forever, twelve hours had stretched out before me like a never-ending road. It was as if the sun had agreed not to rise for a week, as if the culmination of that entire seven days of darkness had been condensed into this very night. My stomach began to bum; the acids excreted because of severe anxiety began to scorch my inner organs. The ulcer I had contracted in Japan was ablaze like a raging forest fire, and I had no water to quench it. The accidental mouthfuls of salt water I swallowed only antagonized it further, causing me to clutch hold of my stomach in excruciating agony. I tried to keep calm and suppress my agitation, hoping it would placate my burning stomach, but to no avail. Until the sun rose I could not expect to feel a modicum of safety and relief.

I jolted my head upwards in alarm. Oh no! I had allowed my eyes to close. I shook my head from side to side to be freed of the hypnotic grasp of exhaustion. In an unguarded instant, I had allowed myself to slip into its deadly clutches. Thank God, I had stopped short of falling into a fatal slumber. If I wanted to see my Mum again I had make sure I stayed alert and awake. Perhaps tomorrow would be the day we would be reunited. I just had to hang on to this bunca until then....

INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS -10

RACHELLE ... 2.00PM FRIDAY MARCH 10, BORACAY ISLAND

2 opposing trains of thought had set themselves up to do battle inside my head. They traveled through my mind with the rapidity and crackle of electricity. One part of me was saying: *'Why don't you face it. She's dead! You know in your heart she's gone. The undeniable signs are all there in black and white. You can't deny the significance of the dream! It symbolized what had already come to pass, a compassionate forewarning to soften the blow when confronted with the facts.'* Then from a remote part of me a voice rose up in defiance; *'No, Michelle can't be dead. I won't accept that! While there is no body or no proof, I'll continue searching for her.'*

This second facet of the argument appeared to have little substance; its case was built on faith, hope and non-acceptance of the cold, hard facts. The other aspect of the argument was based on conclusive evidence. Michelle hadn't come home last night and there had been a violent storm; these were the facts I couldn't deny. The boat she had set out in was minute, with no sail or motor, and the waters she was adrift in were notorious for sharks. The chance of finding such a small vessel in thousands of miles of ocean was almost impossible.

All the overwhelming evidence was stacked against my faith and flew in the face of logical thinking. My hope was being eaten away like a slow cancer, consuming the remnant of optimism. Yet I had to keep on with the search; I would never give up knowing I hadn't done everything humanly possible to find her. My future days would be a torment, and I would never know another day's peace. Lotti was the one that could help me find Michelle.

"Lotti, I want to hire a plane. I don't care how much it costs! Who's this company Air Pacific that Mr. Frazer mentioned? Could you please try to contact them for me?"

"Sure I can. I've already got the number here. I'll try it for you right now."

The next half an hour was spent trying to contact the right people who could authorize a plane for the rescue. I had retreated into a remote corner of my mind when the hum of Lotti's voice reached me as if it had traveled down a long distant corridor. I was drawn back into the moment by Lotti's triumphant voice shouting,

"They've got a plane available, Rachelle."

My sagging spirits were instantly revived, as I found myself transported once again down the river of hope. The hours of frustration and disappointment dissolved; faith now reigned. I was aware of the wild mood swings each and every fresh piece of information brought with it, but this new dimension of the search bore the most positive aspect to date. An aerial search could do in half an hour what ten boats could do in an entire day.

"Lotti, that's fantastic! What do we have to do? How soon can they be here?" I exclaimed.

"I haven't asked them yet; unfortunately, it's a matter of finances. They require twelve hundred U.S. dollars cash, paid in advance, before they will proceed with the arrangements. Have you got that much with you?" she asked, somewhat embarrassed at having to ask me such a personal question.

"No, I haven't," I groaned. "Michelle has all the money and travelers' checks in her money belt, which she has on her. But I would be able to pay them once I contacted my bank."

"Sorry, Rachelle, they want the money up front. They said they've been caught before. Once the search is over, people won't pay up. That's their regulations."

"Oh no! Where can I get that amount of money? I don't know anyone on the island that well. Look, tell them I'll call them back in fifteen minutes and I'll see if I can raise the money somehow."

A shudder of panic ran down my spine; the thought of not being able to get the plane and thus jeopardizing Michelle's chances of being rescued over money, was appalling. My mind was spurred into action! Seeking out a solution, I now had a challenge with a deadline to meet; the prize, my daughter's life. I took off from that office like a wild woman, running down the length of the well-worn beachfront path. *David, David, David*, I breathed with every step. He was my only hope! Thoughts whirled frantically around inside my head. Did he have that much money on him? Even if he did, would he lend it to me?

"Do you know where David is?" I asked, panting breathlessly, when I reached his bungalow.

"He went down to Rafel's. I think you will find him there," said a maid.

"Thanks," I said, barely stopping for a moment. As I neared the restaurant, I saw Rafel outside speaking to a group of men. She looked up as I neared and came forward to meet me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm all right. I'm looking for David. Have you seen him?"

"Yes, he's over at the far table. He's been trying to organize several fishermen to join the search in their own boats."

"Oh, that's good. The more people out there the better." I moved unseeing through the throng of people, knowing all eyes were upon me and voices hushed when I approached.

David appeared to sense a change in the atmosphere and looked up from the group.

"Rachelle, what's up? Is there any news?"

"No, they still haven't found her, but I've managed to organize a plane to search for her. But they want twelve hundred dollars up front before they will even consider going ahead with the search. I haven't got that kind of money on me. Michelle's got it all in her money belt."

"I know it's a lot to ask of you, but have you got enough money that you could lend me?" I held his gaze with the utter pleading in my eyes. I shivered suddenly as if being touched by an iceberg; I was so terrified of his reply.

He jumped up. "Yes, I have and it's yours. Anything to find Michelle! Come with me and I'll get it for you. It's locked up in Rafel's safe."

I unclenched my fists and breathed in deeply; a feeling of intense relief sped through me like anesthetic. I watched as David retrieved his wallet from the safe and opened it up.

"Are you sure twelve hundred is enough?" he asked with no more emphasis than if he were loaning me pocket money.

"Yes, that's all they said they need in cash. Rafael said we can use her as a guarantor for anything else they may require. Thanks so much, David, this money could very well save Michelle's life."

"Look, take it. The money's nothing. I know we haven't known each other long, but she means a lot to me too. So whatever it takes. Just find Michelle, okay?"

The money was thrust into my hand, and I sensed his emotions straining behind a thin veneer of control. In one heart-stopping moment I knew this transaction would bond me to this man forever; regardless of the outcome I would always be indebted to him. Our eyes held for an instant, revealing the unspoken anxiety we were both experiencing. David's voice broke into the depth of the moment as if a pebble had been dropped into a pond.

"Everyone on the island has heard about Michelle. We have been organizing local boats to go out looking for her. You're not alone, just know that."

"I know and everyone's help, especially yours, means so much to me. Thanks a lot, David," I said and hurriedly retraced my steps to the transmitter room clutching those precious dollars which now represented Michelle's life.

A plane! I had the money for a plane! I ran like the wind, dodging people, dogs, children, and chickens as I made my way toward my destination. People stared at me openly; probably nobody was ever seen running on this lackadaisical island. I must have looked absurd to the locals, but I had only one obsessive thought on my mind: To get back and get the rescue operation underway.

I burst into the room shouting, "I've got the money, Lotti. Please call Air Pacific and confirm the flight."

Lotti reached excitedly for the receiver and after some minutes made the connection to Caticlan. With nerve-racking trepidation, I waited, barely daring to breathe lest I break the spell. The atmosphere was tense as if the air had been electrically charged. The time was now 3 P.M.! A voice responded as it came through the receiver and hung in the air, reverberating over and over in my ears.

"I'm sorry, Boracay. Air Pacific has said it's too late at this hour to send out the plane. By the time they authorize the search, plus the one-hour flight time between Manila to Boracay, it will be dark. They would have to allow at least two hours for the search, and it's just not possible to be able to complete the search in the hours of daylight left. They said they would have the plane ready at Caticlan by first light tomorrow. Would you please confirm those arrangements, over?"

My world stopped turning! I felt as if a dagger of ice had been plunged into my heart, and with every word she uttered the icy dread bore deeper.

"No! No!" I heard myself scream hysterically, "I must have that plane today." Lotti was at my side in an instant trying to reassure me.

"Lotti, I can't accept that decision. Don't they understand tomorrow could be too late? Michelle could still be alive now, but another night at sea might very well mean her death. Please beg them. We must look for her today. There's still time! Make them understand my daughter's life is at stake."

Lotti picked up the receiver, and once again I heard her pleading my case. It was futile! The decision had been made; they were responsible for the safety and lives of the rescuers and their equipment. There was absolutely nothing I could do! I felt myself plummeting down as if I had been flung off a cliff and was free falling into an abyss. I felt a scream rise to my throat, and I knew I had to get out of that room before I lost control.

"Thanks, Lotti, for trying for me. Tell them to be here in the morning. I've got to get out of here. I'll see you later."

"Are you sure you'll be all right? I can go with you if you like."

"No, it's okay. I need to be alone." And I hurried out the door.

"Please take care," she said with a look of utter desolation.

Fleeing the confines of the office I broke into a run, hoping by sheer propulsion I could leave behind the torment in me. I needed to find solitude where I could release the intensity of what I was feeling; scream out my anger where nobody would be offended. I looked for a place to retreat but there was no escape. I had to carry the intolerable grief within me till tomorrow! I had to wait until tomorrow. It seemed an eternity away!

Endless hours stretched out before me, each one reduced to minutes and seconds which I had to live through, experience, and endure. My little girl, what hope had she now? I'd let her down. If she were alive, what terrors was she going through? The thought that she would have to suffer another horrible night in the cold dark of night, lost and alone in the ocean, was too much for me to withstand.

The anxiety I felt for her almost made me wish she were dead; at least she would be beyond the paralyzing fear she would be experiencing. I knew if she were still alive she would be crying out for me, praying for me to come and rescue her, and here I was, utterly powerless to lift a finger to save her life. This knowledge bore a crushing blow to the protective maternal instincts in me. There was nothing I could do to help my child. I had been reduced to an ineffectual bystander, floundering in my own human vulnerability and impotence. I came face to face with my powerlessness, and though I thrashed and rallied against it, I recognized my inability to control life, mine or my child's. I wanted the earth to swallow me up. I needed an escape hatch, but the life beating in me denied me a release. I needed to go back to the bungalow. It was the only place on the island I could identify as home, although the shocking thought of being there alone surrounded by recent memories was intolerable. But where else did I have to go?

Our bungalow came into view, nestled peacefully among the flowing palms, bathed in the glow of the setting sun. I couldn't face going inside; instead I sat on the patio and watched the burnished sun cast its last flaming light over the sea. Was Michelle out there somewhere, also witnessing it disappear? The implications of the sun's departure for her

would be horrendous. I felt a crying ache, a desire to transmit to her hope and the knowledge that we would be out looking for her tomorrow. I yearned to fortify her with the strength to hang in there and not to give up hope. My heart was breaking in two, knowing there was so little I could do. I wanted to pray but couldn't. There was still too much fight in me. I felt any show of vulnerability could have the power to reduce me to uncontrollable hysteria, and this I couldn't afford.

How long I sat on the balcony I wasn't sure. I was abruptly jarred back from my sanctuary by David stepping onto the balcony.

"Rachelle, are you okay? I heard about the plane not being able to be here till tomorrow. I'm really sorry."

I was almost too choked up to speak, "I don't know, David. I don't know if I'm all right. Sometimes I think I'm handling it, and then the next minute I'm drowning and there's no way for me to escape from it. Worse is the uncertainty which just drains all my strength and hope. I just don't know where she is. It's a living nightmare not knowing."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to be by yourself," he murmured. "Rachelle, you need support right now, not isolation. Come down to the Beachcomber Bar and have a drink with me. It will make you feel a little better. There's absolutely nothing you can do until morning and you shouldn't be here all night on your own. Come on, what do you say? Will you come with me? I'll look after you. You really shouldn't be alone."

I looked into David's pleading eyes and knew what he said made sense. To be alienated at such a time as this was an added torture I didn't need. I longed for human contact to uphold my spirit. All of a sudden, I felt an overwhelming desire to be encompassed by humanity, an ache for human warmth and conversation. It seemed to me a lifetime ago since I'd known happiness.

"I think you're right. I do need to be with people, but I look so awful. How can I face anyone looking like this?"

"You look just fine to me. Everyone knows what you've been through today. They won't be judging you. They understand."

With David's comforting arm around me, we made our way to the Beachcomber. As we walked into the bar I felt all eyes turn to look at me and then respectfully look away. The events of the past two days had cast me as an oddity, a conversation piece, an object of sympathy. I sensed people were uncomfortable in my presence; they were unsure what to say to me. Should they mention Michelle or ignore the subject completely? Maybe it was best to avoid me altogether. This peculiarity in human nature identifies our inability to face death or any other loss. Mind you, I didn't blame them. I also wanted to lose myself in the crowded room.

David found a table for us in a secluded corner where I could retreat into insignificance and not be bothered by the patrons' inquisitive stares. The first cocktail I drank without even realizing it; a numbing effect began to seep through me like an anesthetic, putting space between me and what I knew I would have to face in the morning. The raw situation

confronting me had been diluted as the alcohol dulled my senses. As it fused with my blood, it warmed to life the chill within me.

The night air was cloaked in a velvety stillness which only a tropical climate could create. We strolled down to the water's edge where the luminous evening silence was broken only by the ocean gently stroking the shore. Lying down on the blanket of soft sand, we gazed skyward, awed by the global planetarium. The evening sky was domed by a blazing galaxy of a trillion glittering stars, each one so well-defined that I felt as if I could reach out and touch them.

"I wonder if Michelle can see the stars tonight from wherever she is." I said wistfully, speaking more to myself than to David.

"I'm sure she can, and we'll make sure this is the last night she has to spend alone—because tomorrow we'll find her!" David said with believable conviction. I nodded in agreement although I had no confidence in what he was saying. I don't think I have ever seen the sky quite as clear as it is tonight. Look at the Milky Way," he said, pointing skyward. You can see right into its depths. It certainly makes you feel insignificant, doesn't it?" he said, attempting to divert the conversation away from Michelle's disappearance.

"When my daughters were small, my husband Brett, the girls, and I would occasionally go outside, spread a blanket on the back lawn and all lie down for hours at a time and gaze out into the mystical universe. We'd point out to the children orbiting satellites and shooting stars, whispering to each other in soft tones, not wanting to shatter the mesmerizing effect a tranquil night created. The girls would often ask questions so profound that we were unable to answer them. As they say, out of the mouths of the innocent are often declared great truths. 'Why don't the stars fall out of the sky?' 'Where does God live?' were some of the questions we struggled to explain. They were special moments I'll always treasure. It's all gone now; time has eroded everything I once valued so much. My home, my marriage, my husband, all those precious moments have been tainted by life's harsh realities and lost through the march of time. Now even Michelle is lost; she's fallen prey to the atrophy of living. It feels as if I'm being stripped of everything I love and hold dear. I sometimes wish time would stand still and allow me to hold on to the things I cherish, but it's impossible, isn't it? Life's just not designed that way."

"I know that you probably don't feel that way right now, but tomorrow your hope will return. Just keep the faith!"

"I suppose I'm sounding dreadfully morbid, but this catastrophe has made me realize even more so, that the only stability we have in life is God. He is eternally the same and never changes. I've exhausted all my options; I feel as if I've come to the end of the road. It seems there is only one path left open to me and that is to throw myself on God's mercy and beg for compassion for myself and my child. I know I must place my trust and faith in Him and believe that in His wisdom He knows what He is doing and take comfort in His words that 'all things work together for good for those that love YHWH.'"

"You're right Rachelle. You must keep your faith in God that he will help you and Michelle!"

"I remember when Michelle and her sisters were younger and how much easier it was then to keep them protected and safe. Now that they've grown up, they do what they want. I'm not able to shield them the same. Like all mothers I have had to set them free, to let them make their own decisions, and pray they will be safe. It's not easy being a mother; in fact it must be one of the most difficult jobs on earth."

"I can imagine! I'm not a parent as yet so I don't have firsthand experience, though from what I've observed it appears to be a daunting task. I think I'll postpone the responsibility for a few years yet."

"You're quite wise to do just that. I suggest you be aware of exactly what you're getting into before you take the plunge because it is a lifetime commitment. I never did! I entered into marriage with a blindfold on. I realize when I look back to those days how very naive I was. I got married, gave birth to Michelle, and was divorced before I was twenty-two years old. I didn't know what had hit me. Then I married my second husband when Michelle was four years old. That lasted sixteen years, and we broke up only three years ago."

"Oh I am sorry to hear that." He said sympathetically.

"Yes it was very sad."

"Michelle talks a lot about her family and seems so devoted to you and her sisters. When she talked about her sisters her eyes just lit up and it was obvious how much she loved them."

"Really, you noticed that? What did she say about them?" I asked, wishing to know more intimately Michelle's last words, each one of which had now become so precious.

"She told me that although there was quite an age difference between her and them, they were close. She said she felt like a second mother to them."

"Yes, that's very true. Michelle was 8 when Angeline was born, then Natalie was born just 1 year later, so naturally she took on that role. You can imagine how difficult it was for her. First she had to adjust to having Brett around, then these 2 red faced arrivals who took centre stage, also she had to share me. But it was not in Michelle's nature to be jealous and she adored her sisters and helped me a lot with them."

"It takes a certain inner strength to overcome sibling rivalry and determine your own behavior and reactions. I believe it's what makes the difference between winners and losers in this world. Michelle obviously adopted this winner's attitude early in life. I reckon that's why Michelle is the person she is today, a survivor."

"That's for sure," I said, wondering what earthly use that was to her, lost out in the middle of the ocean, but I refrained from saying this.

"Even when Michelle was small she was such an extroverted child, very intelligent and full of mischief," I said wistfully, delving into my own memories.

"Michelle was always the leader and had many followers. If any of the children did not obey her, they would be banished from her 'court' and would have to placate her if they wished to return to her good graces. Sometimes I used to worry about her. Michelle was a very petite child, but what she lacked in size she made up for in willpower and determination. Because the marriage was so dysfunctional, I think Michelle felt a vulnerable pawn in the situation. So she took control of life from her perspective and crowned herself queen of the kids. She reckoned she always knew what was best and the other children seemed to agree with her."

"I can totally see Michelle doing that. She is a natural leader."

"You know what is hilarious; she never really enjoyed school, so she created her own one. Down the back of our house we had a little wooden shed, which she turned into a classroom and taught all the neighborhood kids lessons on the weekend. I don't know what the subjects were, not Math's that's for sure, but it was always a full house."

"I can imagine Michelle being like that. She's got an authoritative presence about her as if she knows exactly what she wants and how to get it. I'd only known her a day when we were hotly debating an issue. I remember calling her feisty, and she laughed at me with such an air of confidence. She's got real charisma, and I like that in a woman. Not to mention how easy she is to talk to."

"Yes, she's an original and a very special girl. It's probably that determined streak in her that's got her into this disaster in the first place." And with that remark we lapsed into silence, but David wouldn't let me hold onto my frustrations.

"I only wish I'd had the opportunity to get to know her better. You know if anyone could survive out there it would be her and then I will have the chance to."

"Waves don't bow down to human will, David."

"Maybe not, but Michelle is tenacious, fit and very determined."

"I appreciate what you are saying, and I know she is mentally and physically fit, but an Olympic medal swimmer would struggle to survive that storm in that 7-foot bunca. It was such a flimsy little boat she went out in. It wouldn't have withstood the slightest battering, let alone a raging storm. We both know it would take an absolute miracle for Michelle to survive."

"Don't you believe that God does miracles?"

"Yes of course He does, but.....I just feel so frightened. I can't imagine what our lives will be like without her." My voice broke.

"She's not dead yet, Rachelle. You're giving up too early. Michelle's only been missing 2 days. Remember people are out searching. You mustn't give up hope!"

"Okay David, you are right. I must continue to have faith that YHWH will save her. If only I had stopped her going back out that day"

"Look, Michelle wasn't the type of person who would be easily swayed once her mind was made up. She told me how determined she was to paddle around the other side of the island, she was looking forward to the adventure. No one is to blame! How did she know the wind would suddenly come up as quickly as it did that day?"

"No I suppose not, just a cruel twist of destiny, or maybe a divine appointment. I just pray that she remembered what I told her about accepting Jesus as her personal savior."

"You told her that – I thought you were Jewish!" David said with surprise.

"Yes I am Jewish by birth, but I came to believe that Yahshua/Jesus is the Messiah."

After that deep revelation we both lapsed into silence. As I sat on this foreign Filipino beach in the darkened night, I questioned what YHWH was doing in my life. Michelle was lost at sea, and I had no idea if she would ever be returned to me. Was my faith being put to the test? I remember the Bible said that God tests His children in the same way gold is tested. It is put through the fire to evaluate its worth. This certainly felt like a fiery trial. Was it only through trial that YHWH could test my faith, loyalty and obedience to Him; thereby deeming me of value and worthy to be a precious child of His? This trial demanded I trust Him beyond reason and human logic. I was unsure if my assumptions were correct or not but I knew I must endure.

I thanked YHWH that He had sent David to help me get through this horrendous trial. Now I just had to make it through till the morning.....

A LETHAL ADVERSARY - 11

MICHELLE ... 5:00AM SATURDAY, MARCH 11, CUYO EAST PASSAGE

The first faint streaks of pale yellow emerged on the eastern horizon. Dawn had finally shown itself, lighting up the sky. The twelve insufferable hours of darkness lifted like the curtain on a stage. I had been freed from my private hell by the light of morning. I was alive! I had survived yet another night on this hauntingly lonely ocean. The relief I experienced at this moment was tangible. It washed over me like the balm of ointment on an open wound. Every atom and molecule in my body celebrated in victory that I was alive; my skin tingled as if thousands of effervescent bubbles had risen to the surface.

It was still too dark to see anything as yet. I strained my eyes to pierce through the obscurity of pre-dawn darkness. What would the light of the new day reveal? Would it bring renewed disappointment? Although I desperately wanted to know, I wished I could



postpone the moment of truth. I didn't know how I would cope if the daylight revealed yet again an endless stretch of water with no sight of land. Physically, I guessed I could probably last another two days, presuming that nothing disastrous happened. I knew time was running out, and fast.

The hellish storm on the first night and incessant battering of the waves against the bunca had wrenched the right outrigger from the hull. I had

no choice but to let it simply float away. This was devastating enough in itself, but now I noticed the remaining outrigger had cracked and was beginning to break away on the other side of the hull. Each time a wave crashed over the bunca, I heard a groaning creak as it broke away a fraction more. Once the remaining outrigger broke off, there would be nothing whatsoever for me to hold on to. The chances for survival, then, would be minimal. Although I would never let go of that bunca while there was still a chance of survival, it now seemed it would let go of me first. My chunk of stability, my lifeline would simply float away.

I considered if this happened I could float on my back for a while and hold on to the side of the bunca, but I knew that the slimy green fungus would make staying on impossible. All the speculation was futile; once the outrigger broke off it was just a matter of time. I was playing a waiting game until the gaping jaws of death swallowed me. I just prayed if it happened, death would come quickly. I dreaded the very thought of drowning. The idea of struggling and thrashing against the ocean, trying to reach to the surface while the force of the waves and the pressure of the water held me prisoner, pushing me deeper and deeper to my death, was hideous.

I consoled myself; *'Why am I worrying? I'm not going to die.'* God has promised me that. If I listened to my heart and not my head, I would realize that what He said was the truth. These thoughts were spurred on by my fear and fear alone.

Since YHWH had spoken to me last night and assured me I would not die, my faith in Him and in being rescued shone inside me like a precious jewel. Faith kept me going, the reason I sustained this will to fight. He didn't tell me when He would perform my rescue, but in His infinite wisdom I presumed He knew I couldn't last much longer. Would it be today? Would Mum be here today to rescue me? I could only pray this would be so. It was an indescribable comfort and reassurance to know that El Shaddai was on my side - that He was with me, protecting me and wanting me to live. I thanked and praised Him continually for that. The strange thing was that I felt completely natural in trusting Him. Before this experience I was not religious-minded at all.

This was strange considering I was Jewish, but my dad had been a Catholic, so I had gone to Sunday school a few times with my sisters. Mum often talked about the God of her Jewish heritage, YHWH, but until I'd seen her in Singapore she seemed very confused about her beliefs. Hence, I'd never grown up with traditional religion. However, this lack of religion never prevented me from talking to my creator. The sensation is difficult to describe, but from a very early age I always could feel His presence near me, as if someone were watching over me. It was a tangible feeling, unlike any I'd experienced, and I felt it more intensely these past days than in the accumulation of my entire life.

I always had a sense that I was special to Him and under his protection. Because of this I was fearless and this sometimes got me into trouble. School was difficult for me as I just never fitted in and it seemed like the other kids knew I did not belong with them either. So I became a bit of a loner.

Slowly the rounded orb of the sun began to crawl out of the ocean, shedding a pale orange glow over the surroundings. Straining my eyes which had become like two fireballs inside my sockets, I searched across the infinite expanse of water for anything at all. What I saw sent a long dormant charge of electricity through me, sharpening all my senses and energizing me totally. My heart began to palpitate wildly! Far away, maybe fifteen nautical miles, three humps appeared on the horizon, protruding from the ocean. These looked very much like islands, although I was terrified to allow myself to get too excited in case my eyes were deceiving me. Shutting my eyes, I shook my head a couple of times then re-opened them. It was still difficult to distinguish with them so far away.

A thought flashed through my mind, *'Is this YHWH's promise to me?'* Instead of being rescued, would I be saved by finding land? I was on the brink of a discovery vital to my survival, and for once the sea was my ally, not my enemy. A multitude of waves seemed to join in unison to help me.

Catching the next large swell, I drove the bunca up onto its peak, riding the wave with the help of my flippers propelling me for a good few seconds. In the space of those five heartbeats, God's promise was revealed to me in a blazing glory of truth that shone upon me like a brilliant star. In a fleeting but unmistakable glimpse, I knew those three formations

were islands! After being surrounded by only water on every horizon for as far as I could see and contemplating death every minute, this was the most beautiful sight I'd ever laid eyes on. I was delirious with relief and happiness, as if a potent drug was intoxicating my body and sending a warm glow through me.

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, God!" I called aloud to the heavens. "I knew You would keep Your promise, and my gift back to You is to keep mine."

This flame of hope brought on the most amazing powers of recovery. No longer did I care that my thirst raged like an inferno, that my body felt empty and fragile with only a skeleton structure supporting it. Although the currents were moving toward the islands and would doubtlessly carry me there without any additional effort from me, I wasn't taking any chances! Three days ago, when I had presumed the bunca would be caught by the safety net of Panay's Island, I had been proven wrong. I couldn't make the dire mistake of assuming anything again. The stakes were too high! I ascertained that I had about twelve hours to get there before nightfall. I imagined it would take me about seven hours to get there. However, a miscalculation on my part could be fatal; if I didn't get to the islands before nightfall, I could easily slip by them in the dark.

Positioning myself on the remaining outrigger with my legs scissored and the bar in between, I stretched my arms outward, one holding onto the upturned hull and the other on the outrigger, I began paddling furiously. The maximum effectiveness achieved from these flippers was invaluable. When YHWH had instructed me to grab them, I had not fully realized how beneficial they would be. Although they had given me an enormous amount of protection and security, the propulsion they endowed me with would help me more than anything else in getting to the islands. I propelled my legs similar to riding a bike, which enabled me to move faster by riding the waves effectively. With this physical action totally absorbing me I could feel my fighting spirit return, rising from some reservoir of energy I thought no longer existed.

The wild pumping of my adrenal system as the blood throbbed through my veins was a unique feeling. The raw physical exercise of driving myself up onto these swells, then paddling furiously to ride them for as long as was possible, was a rush. Strange as it may seem, even considering my daunting predicament, this challenge gave me a curious thrill. I was once again in the driver's seat, in control of my own destiny. With every stroke I came closer to my destination. My entire body felt invigorated from head to toe. I concentrated on each movement, closing my mind to everything except the rhythm of my legs. It felt as if every cell, atom, and muscle were working in conjunction to save my life; every organ moved according to what my brain instructed. Riding up onto the crest of a wave then trying to thrust myself and the bunca out of the way in a split second to avoid a collision, was like moving through a haphazard sort of obstacle course. I was continually brought into brutal contact with the pounding waves and forced against the wooden hull of the bunca.

1 hour later, I felt as if I'd been pummeled to the bone with a meat tenderizer; I ached all over with an intense burning. I desperately wanted to continue paddling, but my legs were removed from the control of my brain. I had no choice but to stop and rest for a while. I lay back against the hull of the bunca, basking in the warm rays of the sun. The azure sky was now brazen and cloudless. No obstruction would hamper my rescuers searching for me in either a plane or helicopter. However, the prospect of that was at this stage unlikely. If they

were going to rescue me I believed it would have been in the first two days, not now. As disconcerting as it was to accept, I knew they had probably resigned themselves to the overwhelming evidence. Three days without sighting a plane or helicopter, I hadn't even seen a bird, proved to me I had been nowhere near land - until now. It was frighteningly obvious that if my rescuers were still searching, they had absolutely no clue as to my location, or more likely they had given up searching all together by now. Besides, I suddenly realized even if Mum believed I was alive and wanted to search for me, she had absolutely no money. I had everything in my money belt!

In the Philippines as in many impoverished countries, no cash meant no help. No exceptions! So how would she have managed to get a plane or the money to hire one? It really demonstrated to me the truth about money and its absolute worthlessness. It wouldn't have made a difference if I had a platinum American Express card in my money belt, or if I was the daughter of a celebrity or the heiress to a family fortune. My survival was beyond the control of worldly things. In my case it wouldn't be money that saved my life but the mercy of my heavenly father. No amount of money or power would stop the wheels of destiny from turning. Life and death are predestined by YHWH—of that I was sure.

Over these 3 days YHWH had talked to me, protected me, surrounded me with angels, stopped me from drowning and given me countless instructions on what to do to survive. I felt so loved and cared for, so special. What a Father he had been to me. I fervently wanted to share the love of The Almighty with others. The main message he was sending me back to the world with was to **HAVE 100% FAITH IN HIM!** No matter how hopeless or diabolical our situation was. Total faith in our creator was the answer.

My stomach felt like a churned-up mass of nerves that I couldn't even contemplate the thought of food. I did crave a ice cold beer though. The thought of freezing cold, golden liquid slipping down my throat was pure ecstasy, if only it wasn't just wishful thinking. Although I wasn't hungry, being thirsty was another matter entirely. Water was the elixir my body needed. Every pore craved the pure liquid. My swollen mouth was in dire need of the life-replenishing liquid. But again, when I arrive on the island I must be careful; I mustn't let my thirst overshadow logic. The water must be fresh, not from a rancid swamp or anything like that. Being on an island, being surrounded by water, I presumed there would be no shortage of variety. How fortunate I was to find not just one island but four. If one was lacking in something, I could take a trip over to the other one. Peculiar as it was, I was almost looking forward to this challenge. Pitting myself against the elements gave me a thrilling sensation. Hadn't I learned anything from my ordeal yet?

If I really wanted to catch seafood, I would have to make a spear. Using bamboo or some other sort of wood for the shaft, I could file down a very sharp stone into a point and then tie the two together with rattan or some other strong fiber. It would be a tiring, maybe even an unsuccessful process, but I would give it a try anyway. How strange to imagine myself spear fishing. It was an art form passed down from the generations, and I didn't have a clue, except you had to keep very still, have excellent timing, and good coordination.

I firstly needed to write an S.O.S on the beach for any planes or helicopters searching for me. The other essential element was fire. I needed a fire to keep warm, although I was in the tropics and the temperatures were warm all year round and that would be a strong

factor in my survival. Also, fire would be an excellent S.O.S. for passing ships. I would organize that later. There was one major disadvantage about the warm climate: Heat usually meant mosquitoes and mosquito's meant malaria. I hoped the malaria tablets that I'd been taking for several weeks now would remain in my system and continue protecting me at least until I could find another solution. Wow, there was so much to do!

I guessed now it was around 11am. The burnished sun was pouring its blistering rays on me unheeded. The accelerated thudding of my heart echoed in my body. Looking down at my chest, then stomach and legs, I noticed every inch of me was pulsating. I felt like one giant heartbeat! The raw vitality and boundless energy I had possessed this morning had long since departed. My head throbbed mercilessly with the worst headache imaginable. The tropical sun had beaten down on my unprotected skin for three days burning it severely, to what degree, I wasn't sure.

Maybe it seemed rather trivial, but my instincts kept whispering to me that making the right choice of islands was of paramount importance. I felt my whole life was literally geared to making the right decision. But why...? Land was land, what did it matter which island I went to? I didn't understand the urgency. My choices were either the cluster of three islands directly in front of me, which the current was naturally taking me to, or the larger island that was approximately two miles parallel to the others. Going to one of the three islands situated together would be infinitely easier because the currents were moving in that direction. I would make my decision on exactly which one was the best when I got nearer and could observe the islands closely.

If they all looked relatively the same, I would choose the one in the middle so that if I had to change to one of the others it would be easier and more accessible. On the other hand, if I decided to go to the large island, it would mean traveling not directly against the currents but moving along sideways. I would have to travel in an arc about 180 degrees to get to the point where the currents would carry me in naturally. If I went in too soon, I might miss the island altogether.

My main problem was time. I had only a small allocation of this before nightfall. Traveling at the rate I was going, I ascertained I would arrive at one of the three islands in approximately three hours. If I tried to get to the larger island I guessed it would take me approximately five hours. That would mean if I guessed the time to be 11:30am that I wouldn't arrive until 4:30pm. No, I couldn't risk it - that was cutting it too close. As the larger island was significantly farther away, my prediction of how long it would take to get there might be inaccurate. Trying to evaluate nautical miles within a time allocation could be very deceptive, and I knew it would be foolhardy of me to take even the slightest element of risk.

One thing, however, was in the favor of the large island: because it was so much bigger, there was a good chance it was inhabited. But inhabited by whom? Cannibals! Headhunters! The truth suddenly dawned on me. I was willing to take my chances with even that possibility. I would more than likely live longer on an island, no matter what the obstacles, than survive another day in the ocean. Instinct told me to go to the big island, but logic prevented me. Instead I made the safest decision to go to the three islands. I had the gut feeling I'd made the wrong choice, but I wasn't going to risk my life on an

instinct. My so-called instincts had gotten me into enough trouble already without adding fuel to the fire. However, it was a poignant warning, one I disregarded. In my mind I had made the most sensible decision; anything else was sheer stupidity.

Although getting out of the water was the thing that mattered most, now that there was the very real possibility of cannibals, I shuddered with fear. Do they still have cannibals in the world practicing their ancient rituals, I wondered? This was conceivable, especially in the Philippines, where there were still pirates. And I was not exactly in the middle of a metropolis. I was way off the beaten track in the middle of nowhere. I imagined those islands to be my shelter, but in retrospect they could be something entirely different. Perhaps even the death of me. My eyes sought the islands as I tried desperately to fathom what destiny awaited me there.

In my mind's eye I could see it all..... After the most grueling and torturous experience of my life, miraculously I arrive at the shores of the central island in the cluster of the three. Dragging the bunca up the beach, I finally collapse near it. Sometime later when it's still light; my raging thirst wakes me up. I must find water! My urgent need to find it is more intense than my desire to sleep. Wandering through the dense jungle foliage I search for any signs of life. There appear to be none!

The crunch of a dry twig under my foot captures my attention. I quickly turn around. I can't see anything, but I suddenly have the eerie feeling of being followed. *I'm just paranoid*, I reassure myself, although I'm not convinced. Are my real fears about the islands becoming facts? It's a beautiful island and much larger than I had expected. Already I notice a myriad of bird and plant life; I won't go hungry here.

Without warning I come into a clearing where many primitive huts stand. A structure squats in the middle of the clearing that I imagine is used as a meetinghouse, a type of communal area. *'Oh no!'* I gasp, *'I've stumbled on a village'*. My trembling knees buckle under me as I stagger forward. Leaning against a tree trunk, I steady myself. But where are the tribe's people? Maybe they have gone to stay on one of the other islands. I wonder when they will be back.

Maybe I can make friends with them? In the meantime, what an extraordinary piece of luck to stumble upon them! My problem of shelter and protection is already solved; I can use theirs. I begin to feel giddy with relief and happiness at how fortunate I was! However, in my exuberance, I forget to be wary. Excited at the prospect of discovery, I quickly strode toward the huts to see what else I can find of use. Upon entering the hut an instinctual chill shuddered up my spine, lodging itself between my shoulder blades. These huts haven't been deserted, but recently used. Somebody lives here! Where are they? Hiding?

Turning around, I bolt out of the hut, but stop, dead in my tracks! A score of men greet me dressed in tribal warfare with heavily painted faces, grass skirts, razor sharp spears, and in a fighting stance, ready to do battle. They are not smiling! The sheer terror of them takes my breath away. I am completely spellbound! A multitude of petrifying thoughts floods my mind. Shall I make a run for it? No, then I won't look friendly. I'll prove I am

just an intruder. Shall I try to speak to them or use body language to prove to them that I'm a friend and mean no harm, or shall I just stay silent? I decided my best option is to look vulnerable, harmless. I begin shrinking to look like a defenseless creature in their presence by sliding to the ground and huddling myself into a ball. Abruptly, they start talking to one another in some primeval language that I've never heard before. From the way they are pointing at me I can only guess what they have in store for me. The thought of it chills me to the very marrow of my bones.

There are only three possibilities. They are going to invite me to dinner, have me as dinner, or worse still; push me back out to sea. A thought strikes me with clarity! They have followed me from the beach, so they know that I am alone and have been lost at sea. I assume that they will then deduce that I am not here to harm them.

The chorus of voices grows louder, and they seem to be disagreeing about something. My eyes ablaze, I peek at them. Oh, they are a fearsome bunch! I don't like my chances. No matter how defenseless I appear to them, I am still a threat and I know that by the tone of their voices. If only I had a gift to give them, a sort of peace offering. My shorts maybe? No, that won't suffice. My Nike shoes in the bunca might please them. By the looks of their feet they really don't need shoes, but it may prove a novelty.

Now I am doomed, they will surely kill me! The beating of a tribal drum unexpectedly fills the air, capturing my attention. Simultaneous chanting from the warriors begins. With my eyes glued to the scene, my heart in my mouth, I watch them form a circle and begin performing what is obviously their tribal dance. I can't believe this is happening. It is like something I'd seen on television on ancient tribes and their beliefs and rituals. Are they doing this dance as part of a welcome celebration for me, or are these barbarians preparing to celebrate a feast—me? Through the dancing legs that stamp around me, I can see a fire at the other end of the clearing, being prepared by women and children.

Oh no, they are really going to go through with it; they are going to sacrifice me! A serpent of fear slithers over me, seeping into the core of my being. The fear will consume me if I succumb to it. I have to make a run for it, get to the bunca, and push myself back out to sea. At least there is a chance of rescue in the ocean. If I stay on this island I won't live to see midnight, of that there is no doubt.

My heart pounds with a wild ferocity as loud as the beating drum. I slowly stand up. Turning around, I begin running toward the beach as fast as my legs can carry me. I only go a matter of yards when something incredibly hard and sharp pierces the skin of my back, the force pushing itself through my back, lodging between my shoulder blades. In unbearable agony, I collapse to the ground. The rough hands of a tribesman bind my legs with rope and then my arms. Then I am being lifted off the ground, carried by many people far above their heads, toward the fire. . . . I am going to be cooked, roasted like a pig on a spit.

"No, no, I scream. Stop...."

APPOINTED TIME -12

RACHELLE ... 6.00AM SATURDAY MARCH 11, CATICLAN

I felt myself stirring to consciousness from the depths of sleep. As soon as I'd opened my eyes, I was instantly plugged into what this day held for me; foreboding yet fused with a flicker of hope and promise. Morning had finally arrived, the hour I had waited for. At last the aerial search for Michelle could begin; I was desperate to get it underway as soon as possible. Hurriedly, I washed and dressed, for what would undoubtedly be one of the most emotionally charged days of my life. Rafael had arranged a boat to take me to Caticlan at 7:30am.

The scenery outside our bungalow looked as crisp and defined as if a master's brushstroke had painted it to perfection. I was instantly stung by the feelings of desolation, of how very far from home I was. Keeping a tight rein on my emotions, I tried to avoid certain channels of thought: happy times spent with Michelle, thoughts of the unknown future, agonizing over the what if's; how different choices on that ill-fated day might have avoided this disastrous situation. Thoughts of my two daughters in Sydney and how we would go on with our lives if Michelle were never found were too dangerous to pursue if I was to hold myself together through this living nightmare. So where did that leave me? I couldn't bear to think about the past; I didn't dare dwell on the future; I couldn't think of Michelle clinging to the bunca, gasping for air, struggling to stay alive while the ocean tried to claim her forever. I couldn't think about the possibility of never finding her and wondering in what horrific circumstances she spent her last moments? My mind had been reduced to a very narrow corridor of thought, where the task at hand was all I could contend with. I had to cautiously walk myself through this harrowing ordeal minute by minute.

I noted the sky above me was clear! Good conditions for the search, although I detected quite a strong breeze blowing. I had become delicately attuned to waiting, having woken long before anyone else. I sat down in a bamboo chair on the balcony, tentatively waiting until a respectable hour when I could meet David. My mind turned to the search, although not to the result. There was no way I could foresee what the outcome of today would be. If we found Michelle or if we didn't seem to be veiled behind a distant horizon, where the truth was hidden from me. My only task was to carry out the plane search; I could not think beyond that.

I realized that up until now I hadn't been able to pray except out of desperation. The serenity of nature this morning captured my spirit and instilled me with calm, which was conducive to rational thought. Up until this moment I hadn't been in a state of mind to formulate structured, heartfelt prayers, but had only garbled words of pleading, uttered in despair.

As yet, I hadn't been stripped down to the bare bone, revealing my own futility. I still had the measure of confidence in my ability to save Michelle by human means. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, I was subconsciously saving YHWH as my final trump card if all

else failed. I was scared to waste this option prematurely and squander the only powerful asset I felt I had left. I focused all hope on the aerial search being successful. The next few hours would unearth either intense joy or utter despair.

By 7am my patience was exhausted. I could not wait any longer and made my way to David's bungalow. As I approached his bungalow, I saw David emerge from his room, rubbing his eyes as he encountered the brilliant light of day.

"Good morning. Have you been up long?" David asked, squinting his eyes from the brightness.

"For about an hour. I've been sitting alone on my balcony trying to make sense of this. I was questioning whether disasters befall people at random or is there a logical reason that we just don't yet understand? Needless to say, my questions are still unanswered. I think there are some things we are just not meant to know," I admitted.

"I agree Rachelle. We cannot understand all the things that occur in this world and perhaps we aren't supposed to. But what you are feeling is totally normal. You are trying to make sense of why this has happened."

"For the moment all I want is the courage to get me through the hours ahead. By the way, David thanks for being there for me last night. It really helped me to talk to you about Michelle. It was a way of making her feel close to me."

"I'm pleased I was able to be of help in some way. I feel very frustrated at not being able to do more. Anyway, it was great talking to you. I know Michelle a lot better now, and I feel closer to both of you. One day maybe I'll visit Australia and meet your other daughters, Angeline and Natalie. Who knows what the future holds?" he said.

"Only YHWH, I replied!"

Then changing the subject, he asked, "What time will we have to leave here to reach the airstrip in Caticlan?"

"Rafel has arranged for the boat at 7:30am It will take about half an hour to get to the island, then ten minutes by jeep to the airport. David, I'm so nervous! A part of me can't wait to get up in that plane and begin searching, yet at the same time I'm dreading it. You can't imagine how terrified I feel. I am petrified we could find her upturned canoe floating in the ocean with no sign of life on it, or we could sight planks of loose wreckage from the bunca floating in the ocean, or worse still we find the bunca with Michelle's lifeless body in it."

"You must not imagine those things as possibilities. Just believe you will find her alive."

"Your right I said. I just keep being bombarded with all these horrible images and thoughts. She's my baby.....I can't lose her! I just can't go back to Australia without her!"

I understand what you are saying, Rachelle, I can't begin to imagine what it would be like to lose a child, especially one you have such a strong bond with. You know I was astounded when I first found out you were mother and daughter. You behaved more like best friends. The closeness of your relationship struck me as being special even before I knew you."

"That's what makes it more tragic, because I wouldn't only be losing a daughter, but also my best friend," I whispered.

"You're being very brave, Rachelle. Just keep on top of it. Let's believe today will put an end to the uncertainty, and you will find Michelle."

"I'm almost too frightened to think about it. All I can do is point myself in the right direction, place one foot in front of the other, and hope my prayers for Michelle will be answered."

"I hope so too. I'll make us a cup of coffee and then we had better get going."

What the search would uncover I could only guess; each outcome I envisioned seemed even more hideous than the last. We could find her upturned canoe floating in the ocean with no sign of life on it, or we could sight planks of loose wreckage from the bunca floating in the ocean, or worse still we find the bunca with Michelle's lifeless body in it. *'Is there any real chance that we will find Michelle alive, still clinging to the boat?'* I asked myself with brutal honesty. The odds were so minute, but I had to continue harboring that secret hope in my heart. My other alternative was too grim a reality!

David reappeared some ten minutes later, and we made our way to Rafel's place. We reached the beach. The bone-white sand glittered in the morning sunlight. The fine grains of sand squeaked underfoot as we walked. At any other time, I would have relished a breathtaking morning such as this. This enchanting island was unparalleled by any place on earth I'd ever seen before. A part of me would always remain here on Boracay Island.

David and I sat down on the beach, while a hugging swell of emotion wrapped itself around us. As we sat in silence, each absorbed in our own thoughts, the only sound was the sea lapping gently at the shore. A small crowd of people had followed us to the beachfront, but they stood a respectable distance away, awaiting the drama to commence. Eventually the boat was fueled and ready to leave. Rafel appeared with several young men who would accompany me on the flight and assist in the search. Shakily standing to my feet, I was amazed my legs could support me; they felt like spaghetti!

At the water's edge I prepared to roll up the bottoms of my jeans when a willing young man stepped forward offering to lift me out to the boat. I momentarily hesitated, then yielded to his offer, not having the energy to disagree. David gave me a brief hug, his *eyes expressing everything that words could never say. Calls of "good luck" and "God be with you" filled my ears.* On the boat I averted my attention from the sense of panic rising in me and concentrated on watching some boys pull up the anchor and others push the boat out into deeper water.

I heard the motor leap into life as it slowly moved away from the shore. I watched the assembly of people on the shoreline becoming smaller and smaller. Soon their warm words and well wishes were drowned out by the noise of the outboard motor. My existence had been reduced to the whirring machinery around me and the heavy ache inside my heart. David's plan was to stay on Boracay and organize several more fishing boats to join the search. I felt lost and abandoned without his presence, which I had relied on the past days.

Of course, it was now only an hour before we could begin effectively searching for Michelle, but my optimism had been eroded by the continual delays. Yesterday the hope of finding her alive had been a valid possibility - today I wasn't sure of anything. When I examined my feelings regarding the search they fluctuated between breathless expectation and heart-stopping dread.

The journey passed quickly! One minute we were leaving Boracay, then it seemed in no time we were arriving at Caticlan, a small portside village on the island of Panay. Reaching the jeep, I sat up in the front seat, relieved to be doing something. The jeep was an ancient

relic from a bygone age, and I was amazed it was still operational. When I heard the throbbing sound of the motor, however, I was sure that the vehicle still ran on all cylinders.

Several Filipinos suddenly materialized and clambered onto the moving vehicle, aptly named in Tagalog a Jeepney. People hazardously grabbed onto every available handhold; people were even perched on the roof. As we moved along the dusty pot-holed road, animated conversations in Tagalog traveled to and fro like current of electricity. I was doubtful the driver could see anything through the dust-caked windshield. At one time I fully braced myself, being convinced he was going to hit a boar scurrying across the center of the road, carelessly daring to cross the narrow track. Obviously this Filipino-bred boar understood that the onus was for it to get out of the way fast, and it did, especially considering that the driver's hand was on the horn at least a good ten seconds longer than necessary.

The momentum of the Jeepney seemed to alleviate some of the tension and anxiety that had built up in me over the past days. We trundled past a tiny village where natives sat outside chatting idly. Naked toddlers sat on the dusty ground, giggling at play, unperturbed by our presence. Even at this early hour, women sat pounding their washing, achieving a cleanliness that was their pride to display. Yoked bullocks were at work in the field, laboriously trudging back and forth, tilling the soil. For a brief respite my thoughts were free to take pleasure in the marvels of this peaceful native environment. For a time, I was captivated by the harmonious interaction of these people.

Sadly, the airfield came into sight, and I was reminded of the real purpose for my being here. The pleasure I had experienced so briefly was swept away and replaced with a sense of impending doom. The Jeepney ground to a halt in a cloud of dust. Filipinos jumped from the roof of the vehicle and poured out from every possible exit. I was flabbergasted! There must have been fifteen people clinging precariously to the outside of the Jeepney. Under such a burden, no wonder the motor had groaned! Fredrico, my escort and driver, took charge. He escorted me to a modest wooden building where the airport office was housed. The makeshift terminal was basic, but adequate. The airfield was little more than a cleared strip of land among the lush vegetation.

An airport official greeted me. "Ms. Hamilton, I would like to express to you how distressed we are to hear about your situation. I assure you we will do everything possible to locate your daughter. Unfortunately, however, there is a slight delay. We expect the flight will probably be detained for half an hour."

A groan escaped my lips, but I said nothing. I resigned myself to the fact that they were doing the best they could with the limited resources available to them. I had to remind myself that this was not Australia and they didn't have search-and-rescue teams at their immediate disposal. I handed him the money which David had given me. All I could do now was what I had been doing since Michelle's disappearance. Wait and pray.

DESTINATION OF TERROR – 13

MICHELLE... 11:30AM SATURDAY MARCH 11, CUYO ISLANDS

"No!" I heard myself screaming aloud, seconds before a massive curtain of water hit me like a solid wall, taking my breath away. I felt myself being wrenched from the grip my legs had around the outrigger. Suddenly I was hurtled through the air like a rag doll; then flung into the ocean depths. Clambering upward, my head broke the surface, only to receive the full brunt of a descending torrent. Frantically I dogpaddled to keep my head above water as armies of waves attacked me. From my perspective the waves looked gigantic, how would I ever be able to see over them to find my bunca?

The living nightmare of being sacrificed by the cannibals was momentarily eradicated from my mind as the very real threat that I could drown if I didn't find my bunca was thrust upon me. For a faltering second, I had to remind myself I was out of the jungle and away from the fearsome natives of my vivid imagination. However now, I'd been transported to a more imminent danger; not the illusionary clutches of the tribesman but the very real deathtrap of the ocean.

My legs felt like leaden weights as I had the sensation of being dragged down. I knew if I didn't find the bunca in the next few minutes I would sink to my death; I was just too exhausted. I positioned myself to take advantage of the next large wave. Picked up by the motion of the wave, I rode along on its crest scanning the ocean. With indescribable relief I sighted the bunca five yards away in the next trough. It looked so feeble in the vastness of the ocean; nevertheless, this chunk of wood was the mediator between me and death, my island in the stormy sea that raged around me.

I frantically battled against the waves to swim to it. Lurching forward, I grasped hold of the arm of the outrigger. The touch of something solid in this liquid hell filled me with a sensation of utter relief. Hauling myself up onto the arms of the outrigger, I leaned back against the hull of the bunca, resting my brutally weary body. Its solid structure upholding and supporting me was immensely reassuring. After taking a brief rest to recover from my ordeal, I resumed paddling, knowing I had no other choice if I wanted to get to the island before nightfall. As much as I tried not to, I couldn't help reliving the scene of the gruesome cannibals carrying me towards the sacrificial fire, bound and tied with no means of escape. *'Thank goodness, it is only a dream'*, I assured myself.

I wondered if these thoughts were just triggered by fear and anxiety or were they in fact very real possibilities; something I should be truly concerned about. I didn't have an answer. I was unsure if primitive tribes of the world still practiced cannibalism. Nevertheless, if the island I arrived on was inhabited by a tribe of people who weren't savages, I still worried about how I would be received by them. Would I be a threat to them, an unwanted visitor? Or would I be welcomed with open arms, an object of enormous fascination and a source of entertainment? *'Well what choice do I have. I can't stay here in*

the water, so I'll have to take my chances, whatever the consequences may be and paddle toward one of those islands.'

A deeply-rooted weariness had lodged itself into every crevice, tissue and muscle of my body, sucking the very life force out of me. The only thing that kept me battling on was the sight of the island looming up ahead, bringing me that much nearer with every thrust of my aching body. According to plan, I would arrive around five o'clock. During that time a multitude of things could go wrong. I could collapse from heat stroke, my legs could seize up with cramps, or I could be overcome with extreme exhaustion. Considering the odds against me, to enter into this course of action would in my mind be absolute foolishness. If I didn't make it to land before nightfall, I would undoubtedly be doomed to a certain death.

I was torn in half, wrenched by two distinctly opposing forces: my own rational thinking and the wisdom of YHWH. I didn't want to doubt Him, but what He was instructing me to do went far beyond the realm of logic. It was so overwhelmingly difficult for me to trust again, to put my trust in someone other than myself, especially something as nebulous as the Almighty; even if I felt close to Him. What a dilemma I had been forced into. Again, I had been pushed into a corner with my back up against the wall, compelled to make another life-threatening decision.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, "but I have to do this my way. It's too irrational to try to make it to the farthestmost island when right in front of me there's a group of them. The idea just seems too ridiculous to comprehend. The truth is, I'm just too scared to fail, too scared to risk dying after all. I truly am sorry and hope You will find it in Your heart to understand my reasoning's."

I had made the decision to stick to my original plan and make my destination one of the three islands; but still the dilemma went on inside my mind. A confrontation of wills, mine and my creators, had set itself up inside my head to engage in battle. Suddenly, the decision was taken out of my hands by what I can only describe as the hand of God intervening! Without warning a monstrous wall of water about eight feet high came from behind me. Instinctively I turned around to see what I felt was coming, but I was blinded by the brilliance of the torrid sun. Dazzled by its burning whiteness, through a blurry veil, I experienced something that will forever be engraved on my mind. The towering wave swept under the bunca, lifting it skyward. The wave gathered momentum and height, climactically reaching its pinnacle. Poised in midair, the wave seemed to stop as the bunca suddenly swiveled around 180 degrees in the air, then came back down on the wave's crest, as the wave slid from under the bunca, dispersing into a cauldron of white foaming surf.

Without warning I was propelled in the direction of the farthestmost island, the one where I had been instructed by YHWH to go. As if I were being driven along by an imaginary motor, the bunca traveled along for at least fifty feet directly against the currents. I watched on incredulously as the bunca plowed through the oncoming waves, unaided by my flippers or the motion of the waves. How could I comprehend this supernatural feat that I had witnessed with my own two eyes? This was most assuredly a sign from YHWH. HE was obviously adamant in showing me that I must head for the farthest island. Why? I was still at a complete loss to know His reasoning. However, what His words had not conveyed strongly enough, His actions surely had. This time I dared not disobey His wisdom, no matter how illogical it seemed to me.

Summoning up all the strength and courage I had within me, I prepared myself for the next four hours of backbreaking, hard labor in my frantic effort to reach the island before nightfall. I took a furtive glance at the three islands that I was turning my back on. Oh, they looked so invitingly close. Gazing off into the distance at the large island I was now heading for, I felt so anxious. The notion of doing this seemed like pure, unadulterated insanity to me. Oh God, what is it you could possibly have planned for me? Because of its size, will this island have more variety of food on it? Or is it more likely to be inhabited?

I was so very tired with a weariness and confusion that filled the depths of my soul. YHWH's reasoning and logic made no sense to me, but I had to trust Him. I remember when He told me to grab the flippers instead of the water bottle and how confused I'd been at His choice. HE had certainly proved to me over the past days how invaluable the flippers were.

Suddenly, I heard in my ear the clearly defined words, **"Head toward the largest island."**

Why would He want me to go to the island which was the greatest distance away? I did not even think I could get there before nightfall. But I dared not argue with the conviction of this voice, the one I'd heard on other occasions throughout this ordeal. The instructions whispered in my ear were not loud but very definite. Telling me paths I should take and vital decisions I should make, actions I should or shouldn't do; the voice was also the voice of reassurance.

This voice was distinctly different from the commanding audible voice that boomed down from the sky, the sound of His voice I would never forget! It was impossible to accurately describe but it was etched into my memory. So if the booming audible voice belonged to YHWH, then whose voice was now telling me to head to the farthest island?

I searched my mind for the embarrassingly limited amount of religious knowledge I remembered from the few scriptures I'd heard. Could this other voice belong to an angel or was it Jesus? Was it He that was talking to me? It seemed a feasible possibility. Although I was biologically Jewish from my Mum, she had married out of her faith to my Dad who was Catholic. He wasn't a practicing catholic but there were occasional times I had as a child attended Sunday school on his prompting. It was there that I'd heard the story of Jesus' life. I didn't find this inconceivable to believe because Jesus was Jewish and born into the same faith as I.

Just a few months ago Mum had an encounter with her creator YHWH. When Mum and I had reunited in Singapore, just before travelling to the Philippines, Mum had categorically told me that she had discovered that it was Yahshua/Jesus who was the Messiah and the one who can give us eternal life. She now knew He was the Son of YHWH, sent down from heaven as a man on earth to be crucified for the atonement of man's sins. She was absolutely convinced of this and tried to share this life changing knowledge with me. At the time I was not even really listening. Now I was replaying over and over all the things she told me. The main thing I remembered her saying was that if I

was ever in trouble she told me to call upon YHWH. Well I was neck deep in a body of water and certainly in need of help and a supernatural miracle.

Unbelievably, that was only 5 days ago! It was if she'd had a premonition that something was going to happen to me as she was so fervent about sharing this new-found knowledge and how important it was that I believe and be saved; so that if I died I would go to heaven. I told mum that essentially, I was doing fine and not in need of saving. But the truth was my life had been on a downward spiral and nothing the world gave me fulfilled the emptiness of my soul. I was desperately in need of spiritually saving and at this point physically saving as well. I now had to have 100% Faith that the God of my forefathers would save me both physically and spiritually.

So who was talking to me now; perhaps it was Yahshua who was talking to me? Or could it be one of HIS angels that were instructing me? One thing I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt: I was being instructed and aided by the supernatural force of spiritual beings that were ordained by the Almighty himself.

If I had any illusions that this was not going to be difficult, they were shattered within the first few minutes. If I'd thought paddling with the currents was strenuous, paddling sideways against the currents was horrendous. The entire ocean came rolling towards me, opposing every meter I fought to gain; with only the feeble use of my legs propelling me forward. At least when I was heading for the cluster of islands, I had the motion of the waves coming from behind, assisting my passage. Now each wave that collided with the right side of my body steered me off course. I found myself getting angry at this decision with every wave that pounded against me and each vicious lash of surf slapped my face. This was brutally hard, and I just wanted to give up and rest. However, to stop paddling and rest now could possibly mean losing the few extra minutes of light I needed to get to the island before night fell. I couldn't afford to risk those vital minutes that would otherwise leave me paddling in darkness. I would have plenty of time to rest once I was safe on the island, which in my estimation was now only five miles away.

As I looked up at the sun to gauge the time by its position, I guessed it to be around 1:30pm. Briefly gazing over the endless stretch of ocean, for a lingering instant I thought my eyes were deceiving me, but they were not. What loomed ahead of me was real! Approximately five nautical miles to the northeast, shimmering on the distant horizon, was without a doubt a vessel. I froze with the leap of my pulse. I was finally going to be rescued. My whole being ignited with excitement at the thought of being rescued. Finally, someone had come to save me.

'Is it you, Mum, at last? Oh, I knew deep in my heart you wouldn't give up on me, Mum. You must have sensed I was still alive.' My faith in her had been revived!

A startling thought came to me as I scrutinized the ship. It didn't look like a rescue boat; in fact it looked more like a fishing vessel. Considering I had all the money, it was quite feasible to assume that Mum had to employ the aid of a fishing vessel to search for me. Painted what looked like a soft pink color, it also had a lookout tower. If they were looking in this direction with binoculars, then I was sure they would see me. Speedily I

untied the knot of my T-shirt, ripped it off, and began furiously waving it high above my head, desperately trying to capture their attention.

'Mum. I'm here', I wanted to call out, but the distance between us was still too far to be heard. *Surely they can see me? Why aren't they changing course? Oh, God, please let them see me. Please let them be looking in this direction.* What could I possibly do to prevent my only hope of rescue in three days from passing me by? My confidence in rescue was shattered as the ship made no indication of altering its course but continued to plow through the water without acknowledging my awful plight.

If only they knew how close they'd come to finding me. If only they knew how close to death I was and their power to save me. *Why, oh why is this happening?* It would have been better for me if I hadn't seen the boat at all. It was as if candy were being dangled in front of me but was just out of my reach. With the sinking feeling of disbelief, I stopped waving my T-shirt and watched helplessly as the possibility of rescue and the comfort of human presence glided past, ignoring my perilous predicament. With a sickening thud in the pit of my stomach, I was forced to accept the worst; the occupants of that ship hadn't and wouldn't see me. I realized then it was not a rescue boat, just a passing ship.

Instead of torturing myself over the mental anguish of why this cruel blow had happened, I resigned myself to the fact that this was not meant to be. Even now, in this catastrophe, I had to accept what I didn't understand. A short time later, an eerie sensation rippled through me, instinctively urging me to look at the ocean surrounding me. Half expecting to see another ship in the distance, what met my eyes instead immobilized me; as if I had been cast into stone. For a moment I thought it was an illusion.

In shock, I realized it wasn't! No more than 20 yards away from me, slicing through the surface of the sea like razors, were the clearly defined fins of two sharks. I gasped, my breath catching in my throat, as a pocket of air lodged itself in my windpipe. I did not know this at the time and would find out later that I was bleeding into the ocean and that is what was attracting these sharks to me. For an instant I was unable to move, gripped by a fear so acute, I felt as if the blood running through my veins had turned into ice. Holding my breath, I felt too terrified to expel the air in my lungs and break the silence, alerting them of my presence. A sudden involuntary shudder vibrated through my body. Was this to be my end? One of mankind's worst nightmares had now become reality for me.

Groping for the hull of the bunca I hauled myself up onto it, compelled to put as much distance as I could between myself and that water, ensuring that every bodily part was removed. Clambering up onto the slimy hull, lying lengthways on my stomach, with outstretched arms I managed to balance precariously by gripping onto the arms of the outriggers. The slippery algae beneath me made me wonder how long I could hold on. The hideous fins of the sharks continued to cut a path through the water, but they were seemingly unaware of my presence. It defied logic.

Unexpectedly, an unfathomable calm came over me. Instantly the fear dissolved and was replaced by the knowledge that the sharks wouldn't hurt me.

As if to confirm this, the familiar voice whispered in my ear, "**Fear not! They will not harm you.**"

Again, I had the tangible sensation of angels surrounding me, as they constructed an invisible cocoon around me; stronger than any earthly fortress. Replicating my experience, the previous night with the angelic encounter, I sensed force fields of protection encircle me; guarding me from the elements and the enemy. Seconds before, I had been traumatized by the threat of being attacked and eaten alive; now these fears had been diffused. If YHWH was the creator of all things, then surely He would have the power to control his creations.

Just as I was resting in my security, catastrophe struck! A lumbering wave crept up from behind, its force wrenching me from my grip of the bunca, flushing me into the open sea where the enemy awaited. Stricken with panic, my impulse was to thrash through the water as quickly as I could, back to my precious refuge on top of the bunca. But I knew I had to be extremely cautious and not splash, signaling possible prey in the vicinity.

With nerve-shattering control I swam deliberately; stroke by stroke I glided through the water, causing barely a ripple on the ocean's surface. Not wanting to slow my progress, I didn't dare look behind me and check the proximity of the sharks to see if they were following me, but instead I made a beeline straight toward the bunca. Hauling myself up onto the hull, from my safe vantage point I scanned the ocean for the fins of the sharks and saw them nonchalantly swimming into the distance.

It took my heart a few minutes to resume its normal beating. After waiting until I could not see the sharks anymore, I resumed paddling.

At approximately 2P.M. I was startled by a subtle rumbling noise behind me. Turning around I saw this steel monstrosity powering towards me. Did I have enough time to get out of its way, or was I going to be sucked under the ocean by its crushing force.

PRECIPICE OF DESPAIR - 14

RACHELLE ...1.00PM SATURDAY, MARCH 11, PLANE SEARCH

The drone of a twin-engine plane intervened, saving me from myself. I swung around, shielding my eyes from the glaring sunlight as I scanned the sky for the aircraft that for so many hours had been like an elusive beacon of hope. I saw it instantly; the sun glistened off the silver wing tips as it passed low over the sea coming in to land.

This is the moment I'd been waiting for with gripping trepidation. By embarking on this aerial search, I would soon face the truth about my daughter. If this last-ditch effort were unsuccessful, then it would shatter my illusions and strip me of any vestige of hope that I might resolutely cling to. It was a traumatic process for me to set the wheels of destiny in motion. But ultimately it may save Michelle's life. I had to believe there was still a chance of finding her out in that ocean. The roaring sounds of the plane as it came in to land drowned out my thoughts. I turned and headed back to the passenger shelter, willing my legs to continue walking.

"Dear God, let me hold onto my hope. It's the only thing that's keeping me functioning, I prayed. Without the belief that Michelle may be alive, I don't think I'd be able to go on. Please let me find her out there. I couldn't bear to find her dead or parts of the boat floating in the sea. How could I live with that, wondering forever what happened to her? Only you alone know how much she means to me YHWH. Don't you think I've lost enough in my life already? Don't take her away from me as well, I cried out as I walked back to the terminal."

"Ma'am, your plane is here. We are ready to go," one of the young boys said enthusiastically, eager to begin the adventure.

Yet again I found myself surrounded by a sea of animated Filipino faces, only too willing to assist me. The pilot and navigator introduced themselves and like a lost child I obediently followed them to the plane. I climbed aboard the aircraft with the distorted sense that somebody had crawled inside my skin and was automatically operating my body. Mercifully, I felt removed from the situation which was about to bless or destroy my life. I sat down in one of the seats at the front of the plane. People moved around me although I was not fully aware of them. The plane was relatively small, having only one seat on either side of the aisle. The tiny oval windows through which I'd soon be scanning the ocean were barely adequate for a clear view. The double glazing made me doubtful of the visibility once we were airborne. Within a few minutes everyone was seated and the plane was ready for takeoff.

The pilot turned and spoke to me. "Excuse me, ma'am. The Coast Guard has briefed us on the situation. I believe we are searching for a young lady who was carried out to sea in a bunca three days ago. The location where we have been advised to conduct the search is around the islands of Panay and Palawan. The currents would have carried her

out in that direction, so we will start looking there. We have drawn up a flight plan which will crisscross over this entire area to make certain we achieve a thorough and comprehensive search."

"That sounds fine. How long can we stay in the air?"

"We have fuel for approximately two hours. By then we would have covered an extensive area."

"Have you ever done this before? I mean, search for people lost at sea?"

"From time to time ma'am!"

"Did you ever find any of the missing people? . . . I think what I'm really trying to say is, what are the real chances of finding her alive?"

"Every case is different, so it's hard to say. Of course, several days have passed since she was missing. Obviously, it would have been far better to conduct the search as soon as you were aware she was missing. However, you must always cling to the belief that she is still alive and we will find her."

"Yes, I know. That's the only thing I have now to keep me going— faith!"

The motors roared to life, drowning out all conversation. My attention was diverted outside the plane. I peered through the window and watched the gathering of people who had congregated on the grass verge adjacent the runway. Many arms were waving energetically, wishing me luck. I felt a ray of warmth penetrate my heart, but I was unable to form a smile in return.

The plane taxied down the runway. I was instantly transported back to my enjoyable flight out of Sydney, when I was overflowing with the excitement and anticipation of seeing Michelle again and the expectations of this exotic holiday. The ironically cruel situation I now found myself in was inconceivable! How had it managed to go so wrong?

We had liftoff. The tiny aircraft ascended into the air and shuddered as if in defiance. It wobbled, dropped several feet, but resolutely became airborne; gaining heightened momentum. Within minutes the craft had stabilized, and we were cruising quite smoothly. I forcefully let out a lungful of air, unaware till then that I'd been holding my breath during takeoff. We rose quickly into the uninterrupted blue sky. Despite myself, I was awed by the magnificence that unfolded before my eyes. Boracay Island laid below us, appearing so minute from my new perspective. A slither of land mass; a splinter of earth crowned in an infinite expanse of ocean like a precious jewel.

The awe I felt was all too soon replaced by an overwhelming sense of insignificance in an expanse such as this. The sea below stretched out like a never-ending global carpet of water, spreading out in every direction as far as the eye could see. The full realization hit me with the impact of a thunderbolt, severing any remnant of naive belief I'd held on to. I knew in that instant that the only chance of finding Michelle out there would take a miraculous act of my heavenly Father to save her. How deluded I'd been to believe that once I had a plane to search for Michelle, I'd be able to locate her easily. I'd honestly thought from an aerial bird's-eye perspective, I wouldn't be restricted by limited vision as I was on land. I presumed from an elevated position I would be able to cover great distances and my sight would not be hindered.

Now this misguided notion was torn from where I had nursed it, ripped from the heart of a mother. I felt hopelessness beyond description. Silent tears trickled down my cheeks. I wiped them away hurriedly as they were clouding my vision, inhibiting my view of the ocean below. Although my heart felt as if it had turned to stone, I kept up the vigil of searching the water for Michelle. My eyes burned from the concentrated effort of focusing on the water. The reflected sunlight glaring off the ocean pierced through my pupils like the white light from a soldering torch, making it necessary to rub my eyes every few minutes so I could refocus. The blustery winds had whipped up the surface of the ocean, creating a multitude of foaming white crests that overlaid the face of the ocean; resembling peaks of a meringue pie. Millions of whitecaps taunted me relentlessly, making my task almost impossible.

Suddenly, my eyes homed in on what I thought looked to be a boat. Could this be Michelle's boat? My eyes zoomed in, almost becoming telescopic as I tried to clarify what it was. The intrusive sound of someone's voice shattered the tense atmosphere.

"I can see something down there. It looks like a bunca off to the right-hand side."

My heart skipped a beat. I felt my face flush as the blood rushed up to my head. "Where?" the pilot asked.

I jumped to my feet and within a fraction of a second, I found myself peering out the portside window. Oh my God, it was a bunca!

"We'll turn around and take a closer look," the pilot said with a note of expectation. The plane tilted as it descended like an eagle circling in on its prey.

"Dear God, please let it be her. Please let it be Michelle", I pleaded. My eyes felt as if they were protruding out of their sockets as if they were on stilts; boring through the distance between us. I virtually stopped breathing, experiencing such an exquisite pinnacle of tension. As we descended, the boat became clearer.

"I can make out a person on board!" a jubilant voice cried out.

I strained to see more clearly, but I'd cried so much over the past few days my red and swollen eyes impaired my vision. "Over there, waving out. Look! Can you see?" the co-pilot said excitedly.

It was then I saw it! Sure enough, there was someone on board, alive and waving out to us. It was then I also noticed the sail, which in my eagerness I'd ignored.

"Michelle's bunca didn't have a sail!" I wailed. A cry of anguish rose but froze in my throat, paralyzed by disappointment. I was unable to verbalize what I knew to be true. Seconds later, someone else in the plane obliged.

"No, it's not her. The person in the bunca is a Filipino male." The co-pilot said.

The heightened expectation we had all generated now plunged like a rock falling to the bottom of a pond. The rock lay immovable in the pit of my stomach. It took the crew several minutes to recover from the cruel blow and regain the discipline needed to forge on with our mission. Everybody took their places once again at the allocated windows and resumed the search.

My vision was hampered by the body of the plane which prevented me from seeing directly beneath us. A devastating thought popped into my mind: What if we flew directly over Michelle and she was just a few feet out of my line of vision, hidden by the undercarriage of the plane? It was a grisly thought. Feeling intensely frustrated, I left my position and went forward to talk to the pilot. Upon entering the cockpit, I was instantly re-

lieved to see the 180-degree vision they obtained from the dome-shaped windows in the nose of the plane.

"Can I sit up here with you? I can't see very well from the back." I asked the co pilot.

"Of course!"

"What's that you're monitoring?" I asked, diverting my mind from the obvious fruitlessness of this search.

"I have worked out a flight plan, so we crisscross over the entire area and not miss a patch of water. Can you see here?" he said, showing me a sheet of graph paper with *zigzagged* lines drawn across it.

"This is the area we have already covered," he said pointing to the diagram.

"Where are we now?"

"We are heading out towards the Cuyo Islands which are a group of four islands located due east. The biggest Island is the Cuyo Island. If you look over there, you can see the islands coming into view. The other three are named Dit, Agutaya, and Canipo Island."

"Do you really think it's possible she could have drifted out this far?" I questioned him in disbelief.

"I know it's a long way out and it seems impossible she could have drifted out this far. However, the locals know these waters well as fishing is their livelihood. They know the tidal currents of this area intimately and said it is possible for her to be swept out this far. This is why they recommended we search these islands."

"Look, I trust your judgment. Besides I know nothing about this area."

The isolated cluster of islands was now looming up in front of us. My pulse began to beat faster. My imagination was fueled by the sight of these islands. Was it truly possible she could have made it this far and be waiting on land for us to rescue her? I waited in hopeful apprehension to see her little red bunca pulled up on one of these deserted beaches. Oh, the exquisite relief and indescribable joy I'd feel if this was the case.

'Please YHWH, let me see her bunca, some evidence that she is still alive. You are EL ROI, the God who sees. You see all and know where Michelle is. Please let me see her. Don't take her from me, I implored Him.'

The plane swooped low over the desolated coastline. My eyes were riveted on the strips of ivory sand, half expecting to see Michelle's bunca there. My eyes transfixed to the beaches below, my hopes rose and fell with every life-like image I saw and then identified as something other than human. Strawn driftwood took on the possible form of a body or wreckage of a boat. Every object I clarified as not being either, shattered my fragile expectancy.

The pilot's voice announcing that we were approaching the last island in the group broke into my spiraling thoughts of doom, nudging me back from the precipice of despair. Another chance, another hope rose up feebly, and I grasped at it. Maybe right when we were about to give up, she would miraculously be found, in the eleventh hour, before the clock

struck its last fatal hour? It happened that way in the movies. I wanted to believe that this was our one in a million chance about to come true.

The plane once again descended, sweeping over the speck of land which decorated an otherwise watery landscape. We went through the repetitive procedure of searching the island, but... there was nothing.

"I'm terribly sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news, ma'am, but we will have to return to base now. Our fuel is running extremely low. I wish we would not have to end this way but we've done all we can as far as an aerial search," the pilot said, choked with emotion and sadness.

Every word he said was like a knife that lacerated my heart. The plane lifted up and away from the island. Soaring into the sky, it headed back to Boracay. Anguish numbed me, seeping through my veins like an injection of anesthetic, rendering me *paralyzed*. My brain refused to accept the finality of what this decision meant. I stubbornly held the sea in my sights as we made the sobering journey back to Boracay. I was determined to keep looking for Michelle until the last bitter minute, when I had no other choice but to accept defeat.

The majestic island of Panay rose up out of the ocean. The plane dipped and leveled up with the runway, a mere ribbon of cleared land among the dense vegetation. We wavered, shuddered, and then did several kangaroo hops along the runway as the plane touched down. It managed to come to a relative halt before coasting back to the terminal. Numbly, I uttered thanks to the crew who had accompanied me on this rescue mission. I felt like a walking corpse; my body was operating on automatic, far removed from the activity of life. I was only vaguely aware of the people who had gathered to greet me on my return. There was no need for any of them to ask the outcome. Our grim faces spoke the words our lips were unable to utter. ...

DIVINE DELIVERANCE - 15

MICHELLE ... 2.00PM SATURDAY MARCH 11, CUYO EAST PASSAGE

I was so totally absorbed in my all-consuming struggle to reach the island before nightfall that I barely heard the subtle rumbling noise behind me. Turning around gingerly, I felt as if I had been suddenly gripped by an enormous imaginary hand which held me both frozen and incredulous for many long seconds. I couldn't believe my eyes! Coming towards me at full speed was a gigantic vessel. I knew I had to do something and quickly, but I was so dumbstruck I couldn't move. Only my eyes were free to view this stupendous moment. My heart was beating so hard and fast, I could feel gallons of blood race frantically around my body.

A series of rational thoughts now sped around my mind at lightning speed; then connected. *Oh, please let them see me! How on earth will I attract their attention?* I couldn't bear the thought of their not seeing me and being left to watch the ship glide past me unnoticed as the other ship had. This was my last chance for rescue. Frantically I looked around for something I could use to capture their attention. If only I had a flare. I estimated the ship was approximately five hundred yards away and would probably reach me in about three minutes.

I couldn't see any signs of life on board. What chance was there that a member of the crew just happened to be looking into the water? No, I couldn't trust my life on such a flimsy premise. I would have to think of another way to get their attention. But how? I was at a loss to know what to do. I felt so powerless that tears of frustration stung my eyes. I would just have to pray that one of them would come onto the deck and look into the water. I was left with little other choice!

Instinctively I knew this vessel was bound for Manila! I looked up at the ship with a mixture of relief, excitement, and a little apprehension. Was I finally going to be plucked from these treacherous waters and taken safely back to civilization? Abruptly, I turned to see a gigantic wave rolling toward me, breaking into a spray of white foam as it did so. I desperately tried to thrust myself and the bunca forward, hoping to ride the wave. Suddenly, realizing I wasn't going to make it, I tried to shield my head with my arm and brace myself as I was dumped in a torrent of foam. *Oh no, not again*, I thought as another wave crashed on me; sending me sprawling over the hull of the bunca into the sea.

Thrashing wildly in a gasping attempt to resurface, my head finally broke through; coughing up the salty water I had just inhaled. While treading water I managed to stay afloat long enough to regain my breath. I swiveled around to locate my bunca and the ship. Systematically I found them both and immediately made a swim towards the bunca. Finally reaching it, I hurled myself onto the arm of the outrigger and propelled my flippers in a turbulent motion going against the sea. I looked up to see that I was in direct line with the ship which was powering toward me, threatening to crush me under its bow if I didn't get out of its path.

Panic-stricken, I leapt into action, my legs and arms thrashing wildly, trying to tear through the curtain of water. My heart pounded with sheer terror as I wondered whether it was already too late. Would I be able to get out of the way in time? My would-be lifesavers had unknowingly become the instrument capable of causing my death. Instead of saving my life, they were about to end it as thirty tons of solid steel made mincemeat out of me.

“God, save me! Please get me out of this. Don't let me die this way.” I screamed into the wind.

At the precise moment I uttered these cries for help, a huge wall of water lifted me and the bunca up like a matchstick, hurling us out of the path of the ship. Down I went once again under a barrage of water and resurfaced to see the ship gliding dangerously alongside me. I uttered a brief thank you to YHWH for this spectacular miracle; one of the many that had been performed to sustain my life.

With outstretched arms, I grabbed the outrigger and hauled myself onto the slippery hull of the bunca. Straining my eyes, I urgently searched for any signs of life on board the ship. There appeared to be none. Where was the crew? I suddenly felt alarmed when it occurred to me that they might have put the ship on automatic pilot while they slept. But surely there must be someone awake at this time of day? Captains didn't leave their ships to steer themselves.

My eyes were riveted on the huge ship. All I could see was a massive bulk of steel, a sheer wall of metal reaching skyward as it passed alongside. I was unable to see the deck. I wondered who my would-be rescuers might be and what they might do to me. They could be pirates? These waters were renowned for that and I had all this cash in my money-belt. They might even kill me? Well, I rationalized, I'd be dead in a few days anyway - if I survived that long. It was hideous to think that they might rape me, but it couldn't be worse than the torture I'd endured over the last three days.

Hey, what was I worried about anyway? YHWH had said He would save my life, not end it. What was the matter with me? *‘Of course I trust You, I said in my head. I just keep forgetting You are on my side. How stupid of me to think You would send someone to harm me! These people are here to help me.’*

As the boat passed me I tried to scream “Help, help!” but my voice just made a quiet squeaking sound that nobody would ever hear. *‘Why why why was this happening now. I needed my voice to alert them.’* There was nothing I could do but watch my so-called rescue boat pass me by. It seemed to take an eternity for the boat to pass, but it finally did.

With one last-ditch effort I prayed like crazy and believed someone would come up on deck. Less than 2 minutes later, my prayer was answered. My mouth dropped open in astonishment as I saw first a solitary figure, then many more appear at the stern of the ship. It was just as if they had heard my prayer.

I furiously began waving my T-shirt. I tried to scream again but it was hopeless; my voice was gone. Riveted to their movements for any indication that they had seen me, I suddenly saw one of them point in my direction. Thank goodness, they had seen me! It was an astonishing miracle of stupendous proportions! His friend waved his hand in a signal of recognition. Right before my eyes my prayers were coming true. I could imagine YHWH sitting up there on His throne witnessing this unforgettable scene, while all His angels in their flowing alabaster white gowns joined in the celebration, praising Him for the great miracle that He had just performed.

"Thank You!" I whispered in a voice choked with emotion.

A few more people appeared on the stern of the ship to join their mates in viewing what must have been an incredible sight! They probably didn't even believe their own eyes. What on earth would a white woman in a bikini, holding onto a bunca, be doing out in the middle of the ocean alone? How extraordinary I must have appeared to them.

Come, come, they beckoned me; which I could see was a welcoming gesture. They signaled for me to swim to the ship, which was continually moving away from me. No doubt having to stop a vessel of that size in midstream would take some doing. I watched with bated breath as it finally came to a relative halt about a half mile away. It seemed so far away, and I wondered whether I would have the strength to swim there. Well, I would soon find out. My life depended on me doing so.

My eyes were riveted on the people at the stern of the boat, as I prepared myself to leave the bunca. I felt a sharp tug at my heart! I had developed a sentimental attachment to this hunk of wood that had carried me through the raging seas and delivered me basically unharmed. It seemed such a sacrilege to abandon it now. The bunca had become an extension of myself. Looking lovingly at my poor little bunca, I felt I knew it intimately. It had taken on a personality of its own. It was with sorrow and a twinge of guilt that I said goodbye to my faithful friend. I prepared myself to leave and make the swim to the ship.

I whispered to my creator as I looked towards the heavens, *"You know I am about to make a very long and treacherous swim. I ask you to please put strength in my body to last the distance. Without Your help I honestly don't think I'll make it. And please keep me safe from those sharks. I'm terrified they are just waiting for me to leave the bunca before they make their move and also....."*

Before I'd even had a chance to finish asking, an incredible surge of potent energy coursed right through me as if I were a battery being recharged; sending tingling vibrations through all my nerve endings. And I knew it was EL SHADDAI, imbuing me with His supernatural powers to energize me. In the last three days YHWH had been by my side every mile of this journey; every minute of every day HE had become my touchstone. I had heard Him speak audibly, not once but several times. He had guided and directed me in everything I had done and saved my life several times. HE had saved me from having my neck broken when the bunca capsized. HE had saved me from the jaws of the sharks. HE had picked up the bunca and turned it in the direction of the farthest island, so I would then be in the

ship's course. With seconds before contact HE had thrown me and the bunca out of the path of the ship just before it plowed into us. HE truly was Immanuel, GOD with me!

Stunned and tingling all over by this sensation, I felt as if I'd been transformed into Superwoman. I felt invincible! *Wow, it certainly pays to have friends in high places*, I thought to myself! Without further hesitation, I slipped my T-shirt back on, tied a knot in the front of it, and waved to let the fishermen know I was going to swim to them. Then I slithered off the bunca into the glittering depths of the unpredictable ocean.

As I propelled myself I was acutely aware I shouldn't splash in case one of those sharks would feel the vibration and come racing over to the source of the movement. I couldn't even begin to imagine what I would do if I saw the fins of a shark coming toward me. I did not dare think of it. These thoughts as I swam along were not all-consuming, but they lurked just below the surface, just as surely as the sharks did.

I tried to keep my concentration centered entirely on synchronizing my arms in a breast stroke fashion, propelled mainly by the rhythmical motion of my flippers. I desperately endeavored to keep all these motions flowing in momentum. I was aware not to make any sharp movements or splash too much, drawing attention from the predators.

After I had been swimming ten minutes, a burning sensation welled up in my arms and legs. I longed to stop! How much farther did I have to go? I looked up. The ship was still quite a distance away, maybe a ½ a mile. I had started off energized, but now the stamina I had left was dwindling to a dangerously low level. What if suddenly, my body just stopped, refused to go on? *I can't dwell on that now*, I thought. *I must keep swimming*.

Ten minutes later fatigue had driven itself into every inch of my body, but I was almost there. I had to endure this torturous pain just a little longer. Overcome with total exhaustion, I was at breaking point! Right at this crucial moment, when rescue was in sight, my body betrayed me. I had to stop!

I'd only rested for about two minutes, but it was adequate for me to have caught my breath and calm my nerves. With sheer tenacity I resumed swimming, this time lying on my back while simultaneously moving my legs up and down in a rhythmical motion, not unlike the way a dolphin would, I imagine. This proved to be a very fast and effective way of moving, and it also gave my arms a chance to recover. It was amazing that 2 days earlier I had been told to grab the flippers, not the water bottle and now I knew why. I never could have made it without them. Thank God, I hadn't gone with my own instincts and grabbed the water bottle. I wouldn't have made it this far and be swimming towards rescue now.

I continually swiveled my head around to assure myself I was keeping on course. The constant wind whipped up the water, gushing it over my face. I repeatedly had to spit out gulps of salty water, at one stage almost choking from a mouthful. The salt from the water burned my raw throat and blistered lips. What kept me going on this excruciating passage was the thought of a cool glass of fresh water at the end. It was like the piece of candy that was dangled in front of my face while I was swimming; it urged me on. I desperately tried

to ignore the torturous pain that attacked every corpuscle and cell in me. I played a little game, pretending I was doing a workout. I would set a goal of ten strokes for myself and then think, *Okay, Michelle, just ten more strokes. You can do it!* It was the only way I could reduce the mammoth task into manageable portions.

Totally spent of all energy and in agony - I eventually found myself within a few feet of the ship. Turning back onto my stomach, I swam the last few strokes alongside the ship. Treading water, I strained my neck to look up. Staring down at me in absolute amazement was a multitude of brown faces. Gasping for breath, I looked to them for directions as to what I should do next. My stomach churned as I quickly gauged the distance between myself and the deck of the ship. It must have been seven to eight feet. How on earth was I going to get up there?

Realizing my dilemma, they quickly threw a rope down the side of the ship saying, "You climb up!"

A dirty yellow rope, approximately an inch thick; unraveled as it fell toward me. I was immediately reminded of Rapunzel's long, golden, braided hair being thrown down from the ivory tower. Leaning forward I attempted to grab hold of the rope. Just as my fingers grasped the edge of it, I was abruptly smashed into the side of the ship by a savage wave. I felt my shoulder take the full force of the blow. Then as I moved away from the ship with the current of the wave I felt the shreds of skin attached to the metal fragments of the ship being torn away from my left shoulder as if a grizzly bear had gouged me with his ferocious claws. I opened my mouth to let out a cry of pure agony, but it was strangled; silenced as I was engulfed in a torrent of raging froth. Struggling to reach the surface, I felt as if my lungs were exploding from the lack of air. I had to breathe!

At last the sea subsided and allowed me to resurface, and I convulsed in a fit of coughing. I was so close now to being saved, and yet still the struggle to stay alive and afloat was all-consuming. Through salty liquid that filled my burning eyes, I tried to focus and find the rope. Like the pendulum on a grandfather clock, the rope swung back and forth in the wind. With superhuman effort I lunged forward, arms outstretched and managed to grab hold of the rope. So reassuring in my hands, I knew I held life. With prune-like hands I grabbed onto my lifeline and attempted to haul myself up.

I stifled a sob at the futility of it all. It was useless! My arms ached, and my shoulders throbbed. I didn't have the strength to put one hand in front of the other. The truth was - I couldn't have pulled myself up that rope if my life depended on it. . . and it did!

Looking distraught, one of the men called down, "Hold on tight. We'll pull you up."

It was only then that I realized they spoke English. Peering up at them I noticed their eyes revealed the glint of excitement and discovery. I held onto the rope with every scrap of strength I possessed for fear of dropping back into the sea that swarmed with deadly danger. I gritted my teeth in a snarl as the rusty fragments of steel from the ship ripped the

flesh of my sunburned stomach and legs as they dragged me up the side. I felt God was helping me to hold onto that rope.

I was assaulted by pain so intense I almost let go of the rope but forcefully I yelled at myself, *'No, Michelle, don't you dare let go!'* I knew if I did, I would not have the strength or energy to repeat this feat and death would be inevitable. This was a do-or-die situation! In a silent frenzy I willed myself to hang on. *"Oh, God, help me, help me to hold on. You've brought me through these days of hell alive. Hold on to me for just another sixty seconds. Please . . . don't let me go."*

My limbs felt like putty, completely saturated through to the bones. It felt like at any moment my arms would just fall out of their sockets as my rescuers hoisted me upwards. I tried to maneuver myself to put distance between my burnt, vulnerable flesh and scraping metal. However, my efforts were in vain! As I tried to push myself away with my feet, the silicone flippers continually bent; preventing me from protecting myself. It was useless; I would just have to hang on and endure. Craning my neck, I looked up to see how much further I had to go. I was close enough to look directly into the eyes of my rescuers. The rigid tension showed in their faces!

Suddenly I was touched by human hands grabbing frantically onto my outstretched arms in a desperate bid to haul me to safety. It was the most indescribably beautiful sensation to touch another human being, when I'd sometimes wondered whether I'd ever live to see one again. In that touch, all the purity and beauty in the world was revealed to me. I realized that no matter what creed or color, human beings are the same! I knew nothing about these people, but they had reached out and saved my life.

In their enthusiasm to rescue me they were oblivious to the added pain they were inflicting on me as they hauled me up over the steel rim of the ship's deck; ripping bits of skin off my stomach. With two pairs of arms under my armpits, I was pulled on deck. For the first time in three days, my feet connected with solid ground!

'Oh thank you, thank You, thank You, YHWH! I've made it'. I said under my breath. The intense relief I experienced at that moment was beyond comprehension. I was alive!

The hum of excited voices came to me as if through a haze, penetrating my ear drums. The only words my sodden brain grasped were: "Serena, Mermaid, it's a Mermaid." Repeatedly the words *Mermaid* and *Serena* resounded in my ears. What were they talking about? At this moment I really didn't care. At last my ordeal was over!

A BATTLE OF WILLS -16

RACHELLE.....7.00AM SUNDAY MARCH 12, BORACAY ISLAND

A deep yearning came over me. I urgently needed to talk to YHWH, to be in His presence and allow Him to minister to my aching soul. By this stage I truly believed Michelle had perished on the first night in the storm, but I still had resolutely held onto the minute trace of hope. I was compelled to go through the motions of looking for her, in case she had survived all these days in the fragile craft as she had set out in. I went to find Lotti to ask about a church on the island.

"Lotti, I really feel the need to pray. Is there a church on the island?"

"Yes, we do have one. It's behind Rafel's place. In fact there will be a service held at 9:30 this morning."

"Thanks so much. That's very thoughtful of you. Hopefully I'll find solace in the Word. Of course, it's Sunday, isn't it?" I'd completely lost track of what day it was."

"Yes that easy to do here on Boracay Island."

"Listen, Lotti, I really need a favor. Could you spread the word around and get as many people as possible to attend? I want to hold a prayer service for Michelle. I don't know if she's alive or dead, but wherever she is she needs our prayers."

"Yes of course, I think that's a good idea. I'll tell everybody, and we can meet you there at 9:30."

"Thanks Lotti. I really appreciate everything you have done for me."

"It's the least I could do, Rachelle. Would you like to borrow my Bible?"

"Yes very much!"

She handed me a well-worn, obviously much-loved Bible. Holding it to my heart with both hands, I left Lotti's house and slowly made my way toward the church. Holding the reverent Word of YHWH ELOHIM encased in this book touched me deeply and reunited me with the awareness of HIM. Tears of confusion and anguish poured down my cheeks.

'Why, oh why, YHWH, have you taken her from me? Please help me to understand why you didn't prevent this tragedy from happening. You've got millions of people in heaven. All I have in my life are my three daughters. Is it too much to ask for you to spare her? She's so precious to me. There must be thousands of old and sick people on earth who are just waiting to die. What purpose could possibly be served by her death when she's so young and healthy and hasn't even had a chance to live her life yet? I feel so sad to think she will never know the joys of being a wife or mother. It seems so unnatural that a parent should outlive any of their children. I feel so disillusioned by what has happened. I thought you were a loving and merciful Father. When I gave my life to you three months ago, I believed you would protect me and my children. You say in the Bible to trust and have faith in you, but how can I continue to believe in your words after this has happened? You may as well take me too because I no longer have the desire to live in this world without Michelle.

I wrestled and argued my case with YHWH as I continued along the trail on my way to the church. When people recognized me as the bereaved mother they stood aside and allowed me to pass. Since this ordeal had begun I discovered a peculiar phenomenon: people became embarrassed by death or tragedy and they avoided my eyes and became tongue-tied. Mostly they completely steered clear of the bereaved person. Ironically, at the time when a person most needed human contact and love, people were unable to face the dilemma of death and their own mortality. Perhaps it made them question where their destination would be if they too were taken suddenly. Up or down, heaven or hell? We all had to stand back and acknowledge our own frailty and know that God is sovereign over all creation. Life and death is in His hands, not ours!

As I came into a clearing, there standing in a field of grass was a concrete building that resembled a church. It was not quite what I had imagined but a church nevertheless. I picked my way through the ankle-deep grass, looking up at this structure that was the house of EL Shaddai. I swung back one of the doors that leaned off one of its rusty hinges and gingerly stepped inside. The building was not much more than a concrete shell with windows. Despite its humble appearance, I held it in the same reverence with which I did the magnificent churches I'd seen in Europe. I believed it was not the outward appearance that mattered but the One who dwelled within. I walked halfway down the empty church and sat on one of the wooden bench pews that were facing a simple altar.

How ironic it was to find myself in this place. What invisible network of circumstances had brought me to this moment in time and to what purpose? It was beyond my understanding. My thoughts traveled down a road of memories and stopped at the first time I had entered a church—only three months earlier. After many years of weaving through the occult, new age thinking, philosophy and psychology, reading literally hundreds of books on many varied subjects; in essence I was no better off. This knowledge fed my mind and my curiosity, but it never balmed the yearning of my soul or brought me any real joy. I was a more well-balanced person and was admired by many for my courage and achievements, but the stone lodged in my heart was no closer to being removed. The understanding I had acquired through much study equipped me to intellectualize and rationalize my situation. In every circumstance I'd be able to analyze exactly what was happening and why; which in honesty did momentarily help, but there was no happiness or lasting effect, merely a superficial reprieve; which had as much effect as a band aid on a cancerous growth. The mental knowledge didn't have the dynamics to regenerate my soul. The puzzle of life remained with many pieces missing. I despaired of ever finding the crucial missing piece of the puzzle to complete my understanding so that life would make sense to me and have a definite purpose and meaning.

Throughout the passing years I'd been looking for the food of life in all the wrong places. The golden truth had in simplicity been lying at my feet all along, but I'd been too blind and proud to see it. In the midst of this quandary, I was on the brink of discovering the spiritual principle that did forever change my life and permanently transform me into a new person. The desire of my heart which I'd been searching for as long as I could remember the thing that would absolutely satisfy my inner hunger, quench my burning desires, and give me the answers to unanswerable questions; was bestowed upon me.

It happened this way. . . .Michelle had been in Japan for approximately six months. The girls went to school and I to work. On the surface life was acceptable, but inwardly I was crying

out with loneliness. Under enormous stress, I carried a heavy workload as we neared the peak of Christmas advertising. With daily deadlines to meet, advertising was at its pinnacle; simultaneously I was compiling a twenty-four page business supplement entirely on my own. My brain had begun to short-circuit with the sheer pressure of it all. Leading up to Christmas, I had been besieged by a series of catastrophes one after another. My health suffered both emotionally and physically, driving me to near breaking point.

During this tense activity a fateful set of circumstances were propelled into motion. On a sunny afternoon a friend invited me out to lunch. My spirits were high; I was singing along with the car stereo as I drove to the restaurant, very much looking forward to a pleasant outing with an interesting acquaintance. As I was driving around a winding bend in the road, without warning, my car struck a patch of oil on the road. I felt the grip of the tires lose their hold as I began to careen over the other side of the road into the path of an oncoming car. As we sped toward each other on a collision course, seconds before impact, I thought to myself, *'This is it!* A split second later I felt myself thrown forward, my head smashing into the steering wheel with a powerful blow.

After the car had come to a standstill, my first reaction was, *'I'm still alive.'* I moved my legs and my arms tentatively. They seemed okay. Glancing down, I saw my blouse was covered in blood. Where was it coming from? Then I felt the warm liquid trickling into my eyes, thick oozing blood impairing my vision. *'Oh no,'* I screamed inwardly in horror. Still strapped into the car by the seat belt, I leaned over and swiveled the rear-view mirror toward me, then instantly regretted my decision. My forehead had been split open and was now crumpled back in a distorted bloody mess of folded skin on top of my head. I could feel myself slipping into unconsciousness when I heard shouts outside the car.

"Open the door. Can you hear me? Unlock the door!" Obediently I leaned over and lifted the lock.

The next thing I remember was seeing paramedics around me and then hearing the wailing scream of the ambulance siren as I was sped to the hospital. They stitched me up, kept me for observation overnight and then sent me home. My car had been reduced to an irreparably twisted wreck; they told me I was incredibly lucky to be alive. At that time, I wasn't so sure; to die would have been an easy way out, a peaceful escape forever.

But it was not to be. I had to continue, to pick up the pieces once again. The despair of losing my uninsured car when I had only two more payments to make before owning it outright was a severe blow. I felt a bitter resentment when I had religiously made those payments over the past few years and was so near my goal of ownership. I took a week off work to recover, got a loan from the bank, bought another car, and carried on.

Then catastrophe number two fell upon me at a time when I was at the lowest and most hopeless point of my life. Picking up my mail after work several weeks later, I opened a letter that threw me into utter disbelief. I was delivered an eviction notice for the day after Christmas. This was inconceivable! According to the agreement with the landlord, the conditions of my rental only allowed for one child and not two; it constituted overcrowding and I was being asked to vacate the premises in two weeks. Outraged and in total

confusion, I went to see the local magistrate to fight the eviction order but to no avail. A woman on her own was prey to further disaster and that would surely occur if I allowed myself to cave in. If I fell, who would pick me up and what would become of my children?

I drove myself like a mechanical robot with nothing left inside of me but broken-down machinery that continued to operate, purely out of habit. I found new accommodations sharing a house and several girls from work volunteered to help me move again. I was brutally tired of our nomadic lives and longed for a place to rest, a retreat from the harshness of life; but I found none. The rent had to be paid! My clients' demands were still met, my company got a solid day's work out of me, my children were being cared for as best I could provide for them, and the landlord got his rent. But as for me, there was no one attending to me; circumstances dictated that my needs went unmet. I had no one to shoulder the burden.

Quite obviously there is only so long a person can carry on under this kind of pressure, and my days were numbered. My breaking point came one Friday morning! My diary was filled with appointments with clients. We had a morning where Murphy's Law had been operating in full force, and by the time the children were ready to go off to school I was ready to go back to bed. Of course that wasn't possible! I had a briefcase full of artwork and layouts to put into production by ten o'clock that morning. I had taken this home to work on, so I could keep my head above water. Feeling already frazzled, I opened the car door, threw my briefcase into the back seat, thrust the key into the ignition and was ready to go; however the car was not.

I heard the ignition click over but the engine remained dead. I sat riveted to the seat as an inward implosion of tension began to erupt. A million tightly wound strings snapped, creating a trauma within; which I felt discharge through my entire being. Everything was caving in around me and inside me. Shaking violently, I went back into the house, called a mobile mechanic, phoned work explaining my dilemma, then sat down unable to do a thing to help myself. I felt like a juggler who by his experience and skill attempts to keep the balls in the air and prevent them from falling around him. I had tried to maintain the balance, but I had no strength of will left to keep my life from collapsing. I gave up the struggle! All my striving had been in vain. In that moment of surrender I fell to my knees on the floor and let out a heart wrenching cry for help directed at YHWH, who I believed had ignored, deserted and punished me relentlessly. My cry shattered the silence.

"My God. my God, why have You forsaken me?" I screamed out, feeling like a trapped and wounded animal. I can't do this anymore by myself. Help me, please help me."

I felt as if a hard-outer shell inside of me had cracked, then completely broken open. Through that opening poured a shaft of divine light. An amazing love flowed through my entire being; like a silent river of joy filling every cell. The whole room appeared to be saturated with light. In that glorious moment I knew my cry had been heard in the heavens and had been answered. I felt the presence of YHWH ELOHIM, the God of Israel; the one I had sought for so long. The divine touch from heaven was real and tangible. I instinctively knew in that instant I had been miraculously transformed, and my life would never be the same again. In the darkest moment in my life a reprieve had come.

All those painful years of searching were fruitless; I was looking for the truth in the writings and philosophies of man instead of relying on the provision God had made for His children. Through my own rebellion I had wandered in a spiritual wilderness like our forefathers in the desert before they found the Promised Land. Like the prodigal son, I had returned to my heavenly Father. After living my life my own way, I approached Him, defeated, broken, weary in spirit and tired of carrying the load.

I asked for forgiveness for being so rebellious and stubborn all these years and trying to do things my way. In humility and sorrow for my past, I repented for all my sins whilst out in the wilderness, which were many and varied. I asked him to forgive me for not listening to my parents and marrying out my faith – twice! It was this decision that had set me on this course of disaster and set me up for all future turmoil. My mother had told me repeatedly not to marry Michelle's father because they could see the kind of character he had and that it would cause me many woes. Naturally they were right! Now I was only too willing to obey my Father and live the life He had planned for me from the beginning of time. He received me back with joy for I had been lost to Him, but now I had found HIM again. He then poured His spirit and blessings upon me. I wanted to shout for joy and tell the world of my revelation. But that would have to wait. The knock on the door signified that the man from the service station had arrived to fix my car. The world would have to wait to hear of my discovery.

For the next few months I was carried along by the spirit of ELOHIM. I felt a certain peace and assurance I had never known before. My life was still far from being what I would have wished; nevertheless, I felt a serene acceptance of my situation. One of my colleagues from work was a Christian and gently persuaded me to come to visit her church. A resistance within me from my Jewish background caused me to decline her offer.

However, driving around in my car one day I got lost. I headed my vehicle on a street which I had never been down before. I was struck by the peculiarity of what had influenced me to make that turn, as if an unseen force beckoned me there. As I reached the end of the road, I was exasperated to discover it was a dead end.

I paused for a moment when these words sounded in my head, *"You have nowhere else to turn."* Looking up I saw the side of a large, modern building and the name plastered on it was Christian City Church. It was indeed a sign and a message. This was the way to go. I knew I was meant to return to this place.

2 weeks later, tears flowed unashamedly down my cheeks as I stood in the presence of two hundred people and received Yahshua HaMaschiach, (Jesus the Messiah) as my Savior. In that moment I gave my life to Him and asked Him to live in my heart. I became born again; not born of flesh but of the Spirit of YHWH. From now on He was Master over my life. I stood in the presence of the Creator of all men and accepted Yahshua as YHWH's Anointed.

No words I knew could ever express that blessed communion whereby through the grace of God I received His Son. I'd been forgiven of my sins and received eternal life. What greater joy could be had in the world than to know I was one with Him and through His death had been reconciled to the God of Abraham. I had received the treasure; HE was my prize. I had been humbled and broken that I might turn to Him who created me.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). This promise had truly been fulfilled. I was lifted from the dust of hopelessness into a new life of trust and faith and love and joy.

I was given a Bible and during the months that followed I allowed Yahshua to nurture and teach me His ways. I experienced such exhilaration. My God was no longer far off. He was not an idea or a dead, impotent God written up in the pages of the Old Testament. He was the God of the living. I had been united with Him and there was no separation. Through Yahshua/Jesus, YHWH had become a reality and now lived inside that empty space within me that was reserved specifically for His spirit. He shone a light of truth on my life and showed me how darkened my soul had become with man-made doctrines, traditions and philosophies, clogged with misconceptions and contradictions. I realized that only God's Word brought revelation and new life to the soul.

Now I understood what was meant by the 'Kingdom of Heaven is within.' I was experiencing this as reality. I realized all those years of believing in God, reading about Him, was not enough to open the door to the truth. Knowledge of the things of YHWH ELOHIM and knowing Him personally are two entirely separate things. Human pride had corrupted my heart from seeing the truth, believing I had a better way than the one God had laid out for my life in the Bible. I discovered the mistake I had made by believing being a good person was enough. It was not enough! I had to rely on HIS Righteousness not my own.

I had to ask Him to come and take charge of my life and surrender my will to His. I had to live my life God's way according to His word, His plans and purpose for me. Surely He must have a better knowledge of what's right for me. I had tried it my way for forty years and failed miserably. Now I would do it HIS way! Yahshua, God's anointed from the beginning of time and spoken about by all the prophets, was the answer all along. He was the crucial missing part to my puzzle; only through Him could I be reconciled to God. Yes, Yahshua was right when He said, **"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me" (John 14:6).**

From that point on my longing to know about Yahshua was a burning, heartfelt desire. I had denied Him long enough. If He shed blood and died for me so I could stand without sin, clean before YHWH, then I owed Him my total love and dedication. For the first time in my life I began to read the Bible. As I read the Word, it came alive. Certain verses would leap out at me, and the truth of the words would penetrate the darkness of my soul. Every word was precious, like treasure from heaven. I found comfort, love and peace in those words; a far cry to what I had formerly believed was written there. It became my daily spiritual food. The answers to life's mysteries were strewn like jewels across its pages.

How could I have been so blind for so long? The emptiness I had carried within me all these past years had been miraculously filled to overflowing with the presence the Holy Spirit.

Only three months later, here I was in a humble church on a remote island in the Philippines pleading for my daughter's life. I placed the Bible on my lap and began rocking gently back and forth. The motion had a calming effect on me. For several minutes I was unable to do anything but nurse my shredded nerves. Gradually my mouth started to move, and I began to pray, to beg for YHWH's mercy for Michelle, myself, and my family.

"Oh YHWH, You know why I'm here—to plead for Michelle's life. Father, if I've done anything to offend You, then please forgive me but don't punish me by taking Michelle from me. You know my heart and everything about me, so I don't need to tell you how much she means to me. Please let her live for her sisters and my sake."

Again, a flashing image of Michelle, floating face down in the water flooded my mind.

"Is it too late? Has she gone already? Are my pleas in vain? Only you know the truth; only you know her destiny. So if it's too late to ask you to save her, then please receive her into heaven and keep her safe until the day when we will see her again. Father, I know she belongs to you. You created her and she is ultimately your child, not mine. I did nothing other than to raise this beautiful girl for you, but now it seems that you have retrieved what was yours and called her home. So if this be your will, then I relinquish my earthly hold on her and offer her back to You and give You thanks for the precious gift You lent to me. But if it is not your will to take her at this time, then please bring her back to me. I know you are the Creator of the universe and every living thing. You have the power to save her. It's your ultimate choice and decision. But please don't use her to teach me a lesson. I'll learn a better lesson if you let her live. I promise I will never ask for another thing in my life if you send her back to me."

My prayers swung wildly, alternating from one side to another; from challenging God for the enormous mistake He had made in selecting Michelle for death at her young age, then relenting and throwing myself on His mercy and grace; pleading for Him to save her. I became humble and praised Him, offering Him my faith and loyalty no matter what the outcome.

"Father, I trust Your judgment and wisdom and realize it's Your will, not my will, that has precedence. I want you to know that no matter what, the love and faith I have for You are infallible. If this is Your will for my daughter, then take her back home. I commit her into your care."

The vision of Abraham offering Isaac up to YHWH in utter faith appeared in my mind. Without warning the most poignant words loudly pierced my thoughts.

"Have faith and trust in me for all things, for you only have a piece of the puzzle, but I have the whole picture and know the plans I have for you."

"What do you mean by that?" I called out, realizing that I had spoken the question aloud. The voice did not respond, but I had the sudden, distinct impulse to open the Bible. Without forethought I picked it up and flung it open at random. Where my eyes fell I began to read:

***GOD IS IN THE MIDST OF HER, SHE SHALL NOT BE MOVED;
GOD SHALL HELP HER, JUST AT THE BREAK OF DAWN PSALM 46.5***

This passage triggered a flame of hope. Could I dare believe this was a message from EL SHADDAI and truly conveyed something tangible that I could hold on to? In the frazzled state I was in, I wasn't sure. My faith was such, however, that I knew all things were possible with God.

In that moment, a sensation of extraordinary peace flowed through me and I knew my little girl was in God's hands, whether she was still of this world or had passed from it. All was well, and I had the feeling of being taken care of by my heavenly Father. I had submitted to His will. It was the only thing to do. The clay had no right to question the Potter! I must trust and have faith in HIM!

THE CAPTURE OF THE AUSSIE MERMAID - 17

MICHELLE... 3:00 PM SATURDAY, MARCH 11, SULU SEA

Through the blurry veils of darkness and confusion I slowly returned to consciousness. I had obviously passed out. Foreign voices shattered the silence within my head. Groggily, I came to life! Where was I? Who were these people? I felt several hands slip under my back and legs; the dead weight of my body yielded to their strength as I was lifted off the cold steel floor of the ship's deck. Semiconscious, with my eyes still closed, I could feel myself being carried.

A cacophony of excited yet nervous voices shouted instructions to one another. Although they were speaking in a language I didn't understand, through the commotion I got the general gist of their conversation. It sounded as if they were saying,

"Okay, turn left here"; "Be careful, don't drop her";

"Let's take her into the cabin." Then those words I'd first heard when I was dragged aboard rang distinctly in my ears,

"Serena, Mermaid!" a man said with a note of wonderment in his voice.

I could feel them struggling to carry my practically lifeless body. I was like a real-life rag doll, unable to keep any of my limbs from flopping around. *In a* matter of minutes, I had deteriorated from total control of my body, strong and determined while I was still fighting the sea for my life to totally apathetic. As soon as I realized the battle was over and I was safe, I collapsed; knowing I could succumb to mental and physical exhaustion.

Crunch! A stabbing pain shot through my leg as the men carrying me accidentally miscalculated the width of the doorway, crashing me into the side of the steel door. The pain quickly ceased as if I had hit my funny bone; it hurt only momentarily then became numb like the rest of my body. After the multitude of blows my body had received and being constantly submerged in water for three days, I'd become almost immune to pain.

They delicately placed me on to a type of bunk on the bottom bed. At first the bed felt heavenly; it was such a relief to have support for my body, to let go and allow every muscle in my body to relax. While I was at sea I wondered if I would ever experience the feeling of lying down again. In the ensuing hours, however, the bed I had first thought was bliss became painfully uncomfortable. I realized with some dismay that I was lying on nothing more than a steel slab covered over with a piece of linoleum and a light blanket. Oh, I had dreamed of a mattress that would cushion my battered body, contouring into my shape; absorbing all the torn muscles and bruised tissue.

However painful, this was irrelevant in the face of being alive and in safe hands. I could sense in their gentle touch; hear it in the tones of their compassionate voices that these people were going to look after me. The intense relief I felt was overwhelming; I could now relax, give up the fight and let other people take care of me. I was immensely grateful to hand over the reins to someone else at last. How blissful it was to rest in the cradle of security, knowing GOD had chosen these people to save me. Now I could sleep. Oh,

how I had longed for this blessed moment. Desperately, I called out for something my body needed even more than sleep.

"Water!" I heard myself speak, the words coming out of numbed lips. My voice sounded like a pathetic squeak.

I felt a soft, warm hand squeeze itself under the base of my neck, elevating my head up into a position that enabled me to drink. I felt a cool glass of water being placed against my bruised lips. A spark of long forgotten joy was ignited within me. The touch and sound of human companionship and water were the two things I had most desired; I was now receiving them both simultaneously. The cool liquid rolled off my severely dehydrated tongue and slid down my throat, quenching my parched thirst. Greedily, almost in frenzy, I gulped down huge mouthfuls of water. I just couldn't get enough—would I ever? It was not only my mouth that was dehydrated, but every living cell cried out for moisture. My eyes craved the liquid that allowed them motion; my cooked brain screamed for the life replenishing elements; layers of torched and dehydrated skin begged to be quenched of their dying thirst. This kind and gentle stranger was reviving my almost dead body back to life. I wondered if he realized that.

Opening my eyes, I gazed around the room to get my bearings and familiarize myself with the surroundings. However, a wall of wide-eyed young Asian men stared anxiously down at me, blocking the view of the room. The burning curiosity about who or what I was etched into their faces. I suppose I was a total mystery to them. They had found me in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of nautical miles out to sea. A half-naked blonde-haired woman, wearing flippers, a bikini and clinging on to what remained of a bunca. What on earth would they be thinking? Their faces revealed how stupefied they were. Chattering animatedly between themselves, they peered inquisitively down at me.

Again, I heard them say, "Serena, Mermaid!" repeatedly.

Was it mermaid they were saying? Did they really think I was a mermaid? Surely, they were joking! Or maybe not? I supposed it was feasible. Besides, what else were they to think? They had hauled me out of the sea, hundreds of miles away from civilization wearing no more than a bikini and flippers. My long, blonde hair seemed to serve as verification that I must be a mermaid. Their discovery that I was only a mere mortal most likely shattered their fantasy. It must have been a terrible disappointment to them not to have caught the catch of a lifetime.

One of the young boys kneeling on the floor at the foot of my bunk attempted to pull off my flippers.

"Ouch!" I screamed in agony.

"Stop!" I said, adamantly gesturing with my hands the signal for stop. I couldn't believe how distorted my voice sounded; it was as if I couldn't speak English. The words that came out were thick and hoarse. I saw by the expression on his face that I had offended him when he was only trying to help, so I relented.

"Okay, but please be gentle!"

He nodded, plainly understanding me. Gritting my teeth in agony, I allowed him to remove the flippers from feet that were totally numb. Blue and purple bruises splotched the part where the rubber section of the flippers had securely gripped my foot, cutting off the circulation. It had left a deep indentation carved into my skin across the crown of my foot. As the flippers were removed, a rush of blood raced through my feet, electrifying them into a pulsating, tingling vibration of pins and needles so ferocious that they felt more like steel darts plunging into my flesh. The ravaging pain was so acute that I could think of nothing else.

At the same time, I felt a measure of relief that I was able to feel anything at all. When the bunca capsized, my feet had throbbed incessantly after the first few hours of wearing the flippers. The next stage was a deep ache formed within the muscles and bones; after five hours they were numb. The sodden, deadened nerve endings encased in my foot were now activated by the rush of blood. They screamed in protest as they awoke from their deep sleep. I thought by now I had become accustomed to pain, but obviously I was wrong. Never had I anticipated pain like this; it was pure torture.

As the sea water began to evaporate from my skin the severity of my dehydration and burns became apparent. While I had been submerged in the ocean, the cool water had kept my body temperature down and my skin quenched. Now that I had been removed from the water, my skin had become incredibly dry. Salt had ingrained itself into every pore, making my skin as taut and stiff as a piece of cardboard.

I suddenly felt suffocated by the claustrophobically small room jammed with people. The fiery heat radiating off my body made me feel as though I were sitting right on top of an open fire. The heat generating from my scorched skin seemed to eat up what little fresh air there was in the room. The extent of my burns made me worry. I wondered whether I would have any permanent skin damage?

A young man who introduced himself as Marcial Batingas, the ship's oiler, said, "Excuse me, ma'am, I'll take this off so you'll sleep more comfortably," pointing to my money belt. I'd altogether forgotten that my money belt was still strapped around my waist; it had become an appendage, an extension of my body. I'd been wearing it for the past year while traveling extensively throughout Asia. It was so comfortable that I was barely aware of its existence.

He cautiously lifted me into an upright position while his mate leaned around my back and undid the catch on my money belt. I watched as he unzipped the pouch and pulled out the sodden items that were plastered together, obviously searching for some sort of identification. Staring into their faces, I noticed their eyes held a thousand burning questions, as yet unanswered. Who was I? Where did I come from? How did I get to be in the middle of the ocean? Recognizing my passport, he singled out this item for inspection. As he opened the cover, he read the details and looked at me dumbfounded then burst into spontaneous, gleeful laughter. Showing it to his shipmates, he spoke in Filipino, something which caused them all to join in laughing. I couldn't fathom what was so amusing to them. However, the laughter that filled the small room was contagious, and although I had no idea what was funny, I half smiled too.

As he lowered the passport to show his friends, I noticed that although the plastic covering that protected the photo and vital information had escaped damage, the inner pages had unfortunately not fared so well. Every stamped page was now a smudged inky mess. But at least now they knew who I was! One young man who had evidently taken charge of this conversation looked first at the front cover, then at the photo, and lastly at me.

"She's no mermaid. She is Australian!" he said excitedly, pointing his finger at me. They hadn't in fact captured a mythical half-fish, half-woman creature; they had simply rescued an Aussie castaway, a mere mortal. Now their chances of bringing a live mermaid back from the ocean for the eyes of the world would be dashed. On the contrary, however, I detected an expression of relief on their faces as if they were pleased I was only human after all!

"Is that you?" he said in perfect English while pointing to the photo in my passport. Suddenly it dawned on me that they some of them spoke English. To think that I had imagined these cultured, mild-mannered young men could be brutal pirates—ridiculous!

"Yes," I said, only barely able to form the words. My jaws were tightly clamped together as if they had been wired shut. My own voice sounded foreign in my ears.

In three days I had reverted to infancy; I was like a baby, unable to feed myself, go to the toilet, walk, or even speak. It was infuriating to be so totally dependent on other people for my every need. This was a totally alien experience for me. Being such an active and independent person, I'd never been in a situation where I was completely reliant on another person for my well-being as I was now. Even worse than this was being without my voice to ask for the things my body so desperately needed. The ghastliest aspect of my being practically mute was the frustration of not being able to tell them of my ordeal and relate the desperate urgency of getting a message to Mum on Boracay Island to tell her I was alive. Fortunately for me, my disability was merely a temporary impairment that I would recover from with water, food, and rest.

As I was lifted into a sitting position, so I could have yet another drink of water, I noticed the terrible burns on my legs. Not only was I severely burnt and as red as a broiled lobster, but the top layers of my skin were badly wrinkled from three days of being totally immersed in water. My young skin resembled that of an eighty-year-old. I knew the ship's crew had a thousand questions to ask me and I them, but at that moment sleep was the only thing I was capable of. Clasp my hands together in a praying gesture, I placed them against my cheek indicating I wanted to sleep. They seemed to understand my body language and many of them moved away from my bed and sat at a table on the other side of the room. A young man named Nelson Zurita placed a cool, clean sheet over me before leaving. He soon came back to place a bottle of fizzy orange drink beside my bed. I was so excruciatingly thirsty that I longed to pick up the bottle and gulp down its refreshing contents. As I made an effort to reach for it, however, I found I couldn't even extend my arm, let alone lift my head.

As my eyelids fluttered moments before the sleep my body so desperately craved engulfed me, I was filled with a horrible premonition. If I closed my eyes once, I may never open them again. I was terrified that I would slip into a very deep sleep or become comatose. I was more than likely being paranoid, but I couldn't help but be scared of falling asleep; even

though I was powerless to stop it. The sensation of needing sleep overpowered everything else.

Closing my eyes, I felt myself spiraling downwards; the force that was dragging me under was incredibly powerful as it drew me into its whirlpool. Down and down I kept traveling, unable to pull myself back up to the surface. Like being in a black, cavernous vortex, I felt myself whirl around and around until I was sucked forcibly into its core. I was terrified to succumb to its potent force, but I felt so utterly helpless to do anything else. *'Please protect me from any bad dreams. Watch over and keep me safe while I sleep.'* I asked YHWH silently before slipping into a black, dense slumber.

My ravaging thirst awoke me some time later; it was even more demanding than my need for sleep. Like an insatiable beast it took predominance over all else, requiring immediate attention. I don't know how long I slept but it felt as though I had returned from the dead. I made an exhausting effort to lean over and grab the bottle of fizzy drink next to my bed, when suddenly I felt a hand clasp mine.

"Here, let me help you." said Nelson the helpful young man. Lifting my head up, he put the bottle against my lips and poured the delicious orange drink in my mouth.

Now, fizzy drinks drunk upside down are most inadvisable; the effervescent bubbles exploded in my nose making me choke on the liquid. So he lifted me into a sitting position and patted my back until I had recovered from my coughing fit. The concern and sympathy generating from his warm brown eyes was touching. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and frankly I didn't have the energy to do either. Something special passed between us, and in that instant I understood the folly of racism and prejudice. How can we segregate human beings into races, creeds, and colors? People are the same no matter where or what we are. This gracious man before me had more than likely experienced the same emotions as I had. He would have felt fear and love and probably had his heart broken; he would have experienced euphoria and happiness and most likely hate, the most destructive of all emotions. He went to work, had a family, brushed his teeth, ate, made love, lived and would eventually die exactly as I would. If we are all God's children, then that would make this man my brother, my equal, my friend. Who knows, we might sit on the same cloud in heaven together one day and talk about the time he rescued me—that is, if there are clouds in heaven.

Looking him squarely in the eyes, I said, "Thank you for saving my life!" with an unfathomable sense of gratitude. His reply confirmed everything I would have expected from such a selfless character.

"It is not me who saved your life, but God! Surely you must realize that." These blessed words reiterated everything that had happened during my ordeal.

I was utterly astounded by his response. Did he know this God too? The supernatural miracles, the audible voice of God instructing me and breathing the promise of eternal life into my body, and His divine angels sent down from heaven to protect me. Although I knew beyond any doubt that I had not imagined any of this, Nelson's words were confirmation of

all I had experienced and we both now were living witnesses of Gods awesome power, incredible mercy and amazing grace!

"I can see how painful it is for you to talk so I'll leave you to rest for a while."

"No, it's okay. I know you must be very curious to know how I ended up hundreds of miles out at sea."

All his shipmates now huddled around me for what would be a why, how, and when question and answer time. Although I was still exhausted, the liter of water which they had given me had loosened my tongue and enabled me to speak a little. Despite my exhaustion, since they had saved my life, I felt obliged to explain my mysterious materialization to them. Furthermore, there could be no rest for me until I got a message through to Mum to let her know I was alive. I was besieged by a nagging guilt to have caused her so much pain. She must be out of her mind with worry or more likely already grieving my death. How could I expect her to believe otherwise? I had been missing at sea for days now in horrendous conditions, with absolutely no protection or provisions. The possibility that I may have survived would be an inconceivable notion for her to uphold. For me it had been an almost impossible feat to accomplish, but with God's divine intervention I had survived.

Before I began my story, the presence of something above me alerted my attention. Looking at the wire that ran around the top edge of the bunk I noticed some strangely familiar things. Unbelievably, hung separately with pegs on the wire, were all my sodden traveler's cheques, Filipino money and our plane tickets. I was astounded at not only the obvious trouble they had gone to dry them out but also at their complete honesty. They had all the opportunity and certainly the need, but not a single peso was missing. I would reward them with material worth and give them all the money I had, and I imagined YHWH would reward them too with heavenly treasures. A group of about ten men sat on the floor around my bed listening avidly as I retold my horrific ordeal.

Nelson Zurita, the young man who had tended to me earlier, said, "I'm the assistant engineer. I understand English well, so I can interpret for the crew what you are saying."

"Ok." I nodded my head in assent.

"You are Michelle Hamilton from Sydney, Australia?"

"Aha," I murmured, pleased that all my vital information was written down in front of them and it wasn't necessary for me to relay the basics.



"So Miss Michelle, how did you get lost so far out at sea?"

Briefly I related my story.

"You mean to say you have traveled all the way from Boracay Island to here, the Cuyo Islands, in that tiny bunca alone?" he said with an air of utter disbelief. I heard him relaying my words for the benefit of the other men whose English wasn't as good. I heard the men gasp in astonishment as if they found it impossible to believe.

"Yes its true."

"So how long have you been floating out there?" Nelson said, obviously puzzled.

"If today is Saturday I have been out there 3 days."

"Yes, today is Saturday."

"So where is your mother now?"

"I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. She is either on Boracay or maybe she has flown back to Manila. I truly believe she will still be on Boracay Island."

"Do you think she realizes what has happened to you?" Nelson asked with a concerned frown.

"Yes will know I have been lost at sea and naturally assume I am dead by now. No one will believe I am still alive. I barely believe it. You know if God hadn't saved my life, then that is exactly what I would be. In fact I never would have made it through that terrible storm on the first night I was missing."

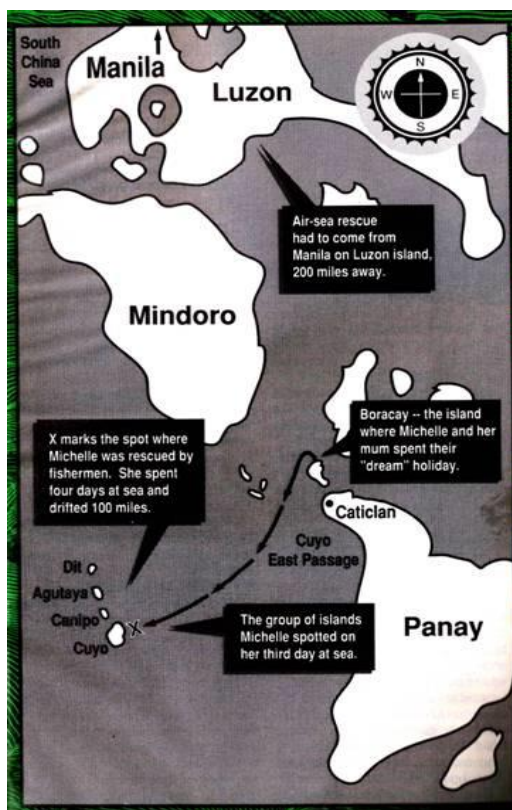
"You are very lucky to be alive, Miss Michelle. It's truly a miracle of God. "

The other men nodded in agreement, doubtlessly realizing they were witnessing evidence of a supernatural miracle performed by God.

"Nelson, I must get a message to my mother on Boracay Island immediately. Do you have a radio transmitter on board?"

"Yes, we do, but now we are not getting a clear signal. There seems to be a lot of interference."

"Can you get me a pen and paper, so I can write down her contact information?"



Nelson returned with pen and paper and I scrawled a note that read Tell Rachelle Hamilton on Boracay Island at Willy's Bungalows, Bungalow number 5, that her daughter Michelle is alive and on a fishing vessel on her way to Manila. I thrust the note into his handed and pleaded with him.

"Please try. I need to let her know I'm alive. I cannot rest until then. I know she will be in a state of panic, and I can't let her go through another minute of agony not knowing what has become of me. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Miss Michelle. You must be terribly worried about your mother and I assure you we will do our best to contact her. I'll go and get our Captain, Baudillo Pactao to come down and speak to you."

"Thank you, Nelson."

After Nelson left, another young man quickly took his place sitting beside me; they all seemed so willing to be of assistance. After being alone and near death the warm compassion of these strangers deeply touched the core of my soul. After being so totally alienated from people, it was a moving experience to be part of the human race again. Life seemed so much sweeter for it. Right then I made a pledge to myself that when I recovered I would repay these people for saving my life in any way I could. Starting by giving them all the cash and my travelers cheques.

"Hello, ma'am, my name is Lusito Toniso. I'm the quartermaster on this ship," he said, greeting me warmly.

"Hello," I said, trying to smile without splitting open the bloody scabs that had formed on my lips.

"Are you hungry? Is there anything I can get you?"

"No thank you. I don't feel hungry but I'm very thirsty."

The very thought of trying to chew and swallow lumps of food was painful. The state of my mouth was a bloody, horrific mess. A tray bearing two bottles of fizzy orange drink and a few mangoes was passed to Lusito who proceeded to skin and slice the mangoes into small edible portions. He fed me by hand as if I were a small child. I was overwhelmed by his extraordinary gentleness. Lusito carefully placed a slice of mango inside my mouth. The cool sweetness of it on my tortured tongue was heavenly. Squeezing the ripe fruit against the roof of my mouth, I felt the mango dissolve into juicy syrup and slide down my parched throat. The feeling was absolutely blissful. It instantly extinguished the raging fire inside my mouth. It tasted like nectar from the tree of life, and I was alive to enjoy it and would never take the simple things in life for granted again.

"Excuse me, Lusito. My skin is burnt and is very painful. Would you have any moisturizer or something of that nature?" He looked at me quizzically as if he was unsure what I meant.

"I need something to soothe my skin," I said pointing to my burnt face.

"I'm sorry," he said apologetically as he kneeled beside my bed. "We have nothing like that on board."

The thought of having to suffer this terrible pain for another twenty hours until we arrived in Manila was abhorrent. I cried out in a desperate plea, "Please help me. It hurts so much! Even some butter would be okay."

The distress so obvious in his face was answer enough to my question, but he spoke the words anyway. "I'm very sorry; Miss Michelle, but we don't have any."

"Don't worry," I said patting his hand, not wishing to add to his humiliation.

"I have another idea about what we could use as moisturizer and I know you have these in plentiful supply—mangoes! Could you please get some and cut the flesh up into long, thin strips? We will place them on my face to cool down the burning." I explained all this with the appropriate hand gestures. I wasn't quite sure what healing properties mangoes possessed but if nothing else it would provide cool relief.

"Are you sure?" he said, looking surprised but at the same time happy that he could help me.

"Let's give it a try hey!" Necessity is the mother of invention, so they say, and this was the perfect situation to employ such a strategy.

A ripple of laughter filled the room as they marveled at me lying there with mango's covering my whole face. I felt a small smile creep on to my face. How ludicrous this was. I pictured the scenario through their eyes. They had rescued a would-be mermaid from out of the depths of the sea and dragged her on board. Sheltered away from the eyes of the world in the bowels of this ship, they had discovered their mermaid was in fact a mortal from Sydney, Australia, who had the passport to prove it. She presently looked more like the Loch Ness monster, than a mermaid anyway and now to make matters more peculiar, she was requesting pieces of mango to be placed on her face. Looking through their eyes, I could see how strange I must appear to them. I doubted their families would ever

believe them when they related the story; they would most likely think these men had been at sea too long and their imaginations had been working overtime.

It was unbelievable! In the blink of an eye, in the beat of a heart, I had gone from death to life, cold to comfortable, thirsty to satisfied, lonely to surrounded by companions. All I could do was marvel at life and the unexplainable hand God dealt me. What an awesome chain of events to comprehend. I had imagined that in a few hours I would have been on the island trying to make a life for myself like a modern-day Robinson Crusoe, not on a Filipino fishing vessel bound for Manila.

Captain Baudillo Pactao returned from the radio room with disheartening news. "Excuse me, ma'am. We have been trying for the last hour to contact both Boracay and Manila, but we are unable to contact either of them because there is so much static in the frequency. I am very sorry that we have been unable to get through, but rest assured that we will keep on trying."

"Oh, okay then," I said with frustrating acceptance, resigning myself to the fact that there was nothing else I could do.

Poor Mum would have to hang on a little longer to find out that her daughter was not dead, but alive and on the way to Manila. I couldn't wait for her to hear that news and for her anguish and despair to end. I had promised her a wonderful, relaxing holiday; a break from the stressful life and job in Sydney and instead I had put her through the most traumatic event of her life. At that point I felt engulfed in wretched guilt and remorse for what my recklessness had caused. It would take me a whole lifetime to make it up to her and Praise YHWH! I had been granted another chance to do to do just that.

LIFE OR DEATH THE BLATANT TRUTH - 20

RACHELLE...1:00PM, SUNDAY, MARCH 12, MANILA

The boat pulled away swiftly into deeper water. Was it possible that only 9 days ago Michelle and I had sat side by side in a bunca like the one I was in now, as we made the last leg of our journey to beautiful Boracay by sea? Our plane had arrived in Iloilo, the capital of Panay. We were greeted by throngs of excited Filipinos, all cajoling each other for our patronage to ride in their Jeepney's to the other side of the island where we could catch a motorized bunca to Boracay.

Nine days later, here I was taking the same journey back to Caticlan in vastly different circumstances. The laughter and happiness of that moment was all but a distorted memory. I was leaving Boracay alone, but my daughter would remain here forever. I felt myself being led onto the plane. The fuselage rumbled as the aircraft revved to its maximum. We bounced along the makeshift runway, the vibrations finally ceasing as we became airborne. Within seconds I could see the tops of palm trees, then the bleached expanses of beach converging with the ocean, hundreds of miles of it. The island looked nothing more than a minuscule droplet of fertile earth against the immensity of the oceanic blue liquid.

I was instantly struck by the possibility of seeing Michelle's bunca as we flew over the sea from Boracay to Manila. A flood of hope shot through my veins. I became alive with the alluring suggestion. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I walked up the aisle, and spoke individually to each passenger, pleading for them to look out for a small boat which could very possibly contain the precious cargo of my daughter in it, who had been lost at sea five days ago.

I felt inquisitive eyes search out mine, delving into my wretched thoughts, trying to fathom what it would feel like to be the parent who had just lost her child. Sympathetic glances and words of consolation were uttered, though I wasn't listening. I didn't need their pity; I needed their help. All that I required of them was to enlist their eyes to scan the ocean surface where mine could not. To my relief they were more than agreeable. I observed their faces pressed to the windows, eager to be of service to a grief-stricken mother.

By the time I had returned to my seat and looked out the window, to my dismay the plane had gained considerable altitude. We were now flying so high above the ocean it resembled a gigantic blue carpet, where nothing distinguishable could be seen. I was distraught that we could fly right over Michelle and she would see us but we wouldn't be able to see her. I wrestled with the terrible irony of this happening for some minutes, and then gave up the mental anguish.

I realized it was futile to pit myself against something I had no control over. Of course, I was far from accepting what had happened, but I had to believe YHWH had His reasons and at this time in my life I hadn't either the wisdom or ability to see into eternity and judge what was right or wrong. I questioned if I really believed HE knew us intimately and could intercede on our behalf, or was I just paying lip service to a deity I didn't believe really could intervene or physically act in human affairs. It was a tough one!

I sat with that question burning into me with the intensity of a blowtorch. People proclaim they believe in GOD when confronted with death or disaster, they turned to God, pleaded for His help to rectify the situation or produce a miracle; but did they really believe He had the power to do what they asked or the faith to know He could?

In this very confusing situation I found myself faced with the same conflicting questions, forced to confront what I truly believed. The faith I believed I had was put to the ultimate test. These crucial questions flamed within me, demanding answers!

Deliberating this question, I finally broke through from indecision into clarity.

'Yes, Father, I do believe You have the power, and I will not withdraw my trust in You. I don't know why this has happened to my darling girl. I know she's Your child as well, but because my understanding is so limited, please give me the heart to know You better and the strength to accept Your will, and please heal the pain.'

Tears of humility flowed gently down my cheeks, the conflicting emotions and oppressing disillusionment had lifted from me and in their place, I felt a reassurance and serenity. An unfathomable tranquillity seeped through my entire being; like cool water it extinguished the inferno that had raged over the past five days. At last I felt a measure of peace.

I gazed out the window and was astonished to see the most magnificent rainbow. For a moment I just stared at it, then instantly it struck me as being strangely significant. I had never seen anything like it before! It was only a miniature rainbow shaped like a boomerang; the seven colours were so vivid and well-defined. It was as if YHWH had placed it in the sky for my benefit alone. I clung to this sign from heaven. YHWH was acknowledging His promise; He had heard my prayers and all was well. I was reminded of what the rainbow represented. YHWH had created the rainbow for Noah to see after the earth's destruction by the Great Flood. It symbolized His eternal promise that He upholds those who have faith and love Him. It seemed uncanny the way this extraordinary-shaped rainbow appeared in the sky as if for my eyes only.



For the first time in days I felt fortified sufficiently enough to turn my thoughts to my two younger children who were still innocently unaware of the tragedy that had taken place. My arms suddenly felt empty and I longed to hold them. The fierceness of a mother lion to protect her cubs gripped hold of me.

I urgently yearned to take solace in their sweet innocence, to touch them, hug them, and sincerely appreciate the precious gift given me through my children. What wonderful thing had I ever done to deserve these treasures to fill my life with love and joy? One moment in the act of love these children were conceived and grew to perfection. They are truly the mark of God's great work. He had fashioned them in His likeness, then offered them into my care. What a priceless gift.

I experienced a twinge of guilt! How blasé I had been taking everything in life for granted. Never again would I take life for granted or forget to tell the people I love, how much I appreciate and cherish them. One never knows the day or hour when our loved ones will be called home. I took comfort in the fact that Michelle and I had spent those wonderful last days together, they would be memories I'd treasure forever.

I had the sensation that we were descending. Glancing out of the window to confirm my notion I saw the city of Manila ahead of us, the tall buildings of Makati standing out against the skyline. It felt as if a motor inside my chest had kick-started my heart. From the relative calm I had maintained during the flight, I was abruptly thrust into a frantic panic.

Slinging one backpack over my shoulder, I managed to half carry; half drag the other one toward the barrier. My eyes instantly met a gentleman who was obviously seeking me out. It could be none other than George Frazer from the Australian Embassy. The expression on his friendly face indicated he recognized me. As he stepped forward he alleviated me from the burden I was dragging behind me.

"You must be Ms. Hamilton? I'm George Frazer from the Australian Embassy and also a representative from the New Zealand Consulate has also come to meet you."

"Hello, thank you for meeting me. I appreciate that."

"That's okay. Is this your only luggage?"

"Yes."

"We have a car waiting out the front. Here, let me carry that pack for you."

"Oh thanks." I willingly allowed these two men to take control of the situation and bear some of the weight of responsibility from my shoulders.

Mr. Frazer had a pleasant, true-blue Australian face, if there was such a thing. His expression was warm, and the eyes behind the glasses were full of compassion; I imagined him to be totally without a bone of malice in his body. No doubt this was one of the more unpleasant duties he had to perform in the official role of Embassy Consulate. I was so relieved to be in the company of my own countrymen and found it reassuring to be back at last on the mainland, in the protection of officials who had the power to help me. I was bewildered as to why the New Zealand Consulate representative was present. I knew I had only contacted the Australian Embassy, so how did they know of my Kiwi background? The question went unanswered; I was only grateful to have their presence I decided, as I followed them out to the waiting vehicle.

We drove through the winding traffic, and both men, sensing my distraction, allowed me to adjust to this energetic environment before they asked me the barrage of painful questions which we all knew must eventually be asked. As we approached his gated complex, the uniformed security patrol recognized the car, opening the formidable gates immediately. I was shocked to see the heavy weaponry he carried, especially since I presumed this was a suburban area. Evidently the diplomatic families and other important persons who lived within the walls needed security and protection.

Enclosed inside the compound were homes, streets, in fact a complete suburb where international delegates and businessmen could reside in seclusion. As we cruised past magnificent Hollywood-styled homes, it came as an abrupt awakening to see such a sharp disparity of living standards in such proximity. I made no comment of my perception; this was

common in modern cities all over the world. The rich and the poor living on top of each other in sprawling overcrowded metropolis, was a fact of twentieth-century living.

I was ushered into a spacious lounge room tastefully furnished in subtle natural tones. The elegantly decorated room was in stark contrast to the casual jeans and track shoes I was wearing; they seemed to emphasize the unforeseen circumstances that brought me here. I felt distinctly out of place in the unfamiliar setting, although my hosts were doing everything possible to help me feel comfortable. Delicious hors d'oeuvres and refreshments were offered by George's wife, a petite beauty from Laos. I absently picked at the food but had no appetite; it was merely a diversion to fill the apprehension. I was simply delaying the moment when I would be expected to relate the traumatic events of the past few days. For a brief time, I had been absorbed by the sights and sounds of downtown Manila, but now that distraction had passed. My real purpose for being here thrust itself into the forefront of my mind.

"I imagine this is going to be very upsetting for you to talk about, but unfortunately we need to know the exact details of how this happened to Michelle." Mr. Frazer asked concerned, realizing what he was asking me to do.

"When did this tragedy begin...." I said absently searching my mind for a starting point.Did the process begin when we chose to hire the boat for the day, or more likely the wheels for disaster were set in motion when Michelle elected not to come in when I returned to shore, but rather to sail around the island? At precisely what moment did an innocent days outing turn to catastrophe? Without knowing what happened to Michelle, these questions would probably always remain a mystery.

Stammering out the first few words I tentatively began, "On Tuesday, when we had been horseback riding, we discovered the remote beauty of the other side of the island and decided to hire a boat the next day and sail around to it. However, the next day, it was so windy that we decided to postpone it till the following day, which was the Thursday the 9th of March. The weather conditions looked perfect that day and we hired a bunca from the owners of Willy's bungalows, where we were staying. We had planned a picnic and some snorkelling. It was supposed to be such a wonderful day." I explained in a voice quavering with emotion as I recalled the events of that fateful day.

"When did you and Michelle get separated?"

"I have gone over every single detail of that day and will no doubt continue to churn them over again and again in the years to come, the terrible circumstances that have taken my daughter's life. She dropped me back to shore at about 9.30am and I will forever relive the moment. I asked her to come in with me but she did not want to. If only I had been adamant about it, this may never have happened and I wouldn't be sitting here now." The thought of Michelle lying on the bottom of the ocean conjured up grisly images that triggered a chilling sensation, congealing the warm flow of blood in my veins.

"You mustn't torment yourself with guilt. There was no way you could have known the outcome. It was not your fault! Don't blame yourself!" Mr. Frazer comforted me.

"I don't really, but to know I could have prevented it and didn't."

"Don't dwell on that now. You'll only upset yourself more. By the way, can you remember what time Michelle set out in the boat alone?"

"About ten thirty was the last time I saw her alive!" Sobs of inconsolable grief, that I'd held in check; burst forth like a fountain. Powerless to comfort me, my hosts compassionately waited for my tears to subside before I could continue the story.

"We are very distressed by what has happened," he soothed. "My job frequently involves having to deal with matters similar to this, and it never gets any easier. When an Australian loses his life over here, we all feel saddened. If there is anything we can do to help you through this rough time, please don't hesitate to ask. We will do all we can to help."

I was instantly alert. "Actually, there is something you can help me with. That's specifically what I've come here for. I want an official, full-scale search mounted for Michelle immediately. The search up until now has been sketchy and insufficient. Several fishing boats went out looking for her but found nothing. As you already know, I hired a light plane to search for her, but after two hours they found no trace of her. Apart from these two limited attempts to find her, nothing else significant has been done. How long would it take for you to authorize a search and get it underway?"

"Rachelle, if I may call you that, it's distressing for me to have to tell you this, but as I explained to you on the phone before you left Boracay, unfortunately we have neither the resources nor equipment to carry out a search of this nature."

"There must be something you can do! I was told there are American military units based right here in Manila. They must have aircrafts and helicopters available. Considering the urgency of the situation, couldn't you ask them if they could make a plane available? After all, they are our allies. Please do whatever you can," I pleaded, the desperation rising in my voice.

"Those aircraft you're speaking of are military planes, not civil, and we have no such policy to request assistance for private searches. I'm truly sorry, but I don't know what else to suggest to you. You have already conducted an aerial search around the supposed area where she went missing and found nothing."

"Oh I see." I said, the hopelessness and despair of the situation slapping me again with ferocity.

Shifting uncomfortably in his chair and looking at me sympathetically, he said, "She's been gone five days now, hasn't she? The chances of finding her are . . ." He couldn't finish what he was going to say, and his words hung in the air like a death sentence.

Devastated, I slumped in the chair trying to comprehend the impact of his condemning words. It was perfectly clear to me he thought the situation was hopeless; his verdict seemed final. He believed Michelle would not be coming back. Too choked with emotion to speak, I remained silent. I realized this was it. I have come to the end of the road and there is nowhere else to turn. A feeble objection rose up in me, and then collapsed; I had no impetus left in me to fight back. I had to acknowledge the finality of Michelle's destiny: My beloved daughter who was lost at sea had obviously drowned in the storm on that first night. The reality that I had attempted to deny for days, now surfaced, and I had to accept it.

Inwardly I'd feared this all along because my thoughts had kept returning magnetically to the crucial scene in my dream, where Michelle had become the embodiment of that lifeless doll floating in the ocean with its eyes missing, where the soul of its occupant had so obviously departed. I felt so infuriatingly ineffectual; if only there were something more I could do! Now I had to face up to the fact that Michelle was dead, but at least I could salve my conscience by knowing that I had done everything possible to save her. Although I had suspected the truth all along, making this admission outwardly caused an eruption inside me.

"She was such a beautiful girl, so special..." I mumbled, speaking to no one particular.

"I'm sure she was," someone commiserated.

"You know, I'd come on this holiday to rest and spend time with Michelle. If only I could have foreseen what would happen. I can't believe she's dead; it's still impossible to accept. You know, she was only twenty-two and had so much life in her. She was always such a fearless, trying to extract as much out of life as she could. She wasn't afraid to take a risk or speak her mind even though it did sometimes get her into trouble. Her blatant truthfulness often shocked people, but that never stopped her. She radiated such an air of confidence she was able to get away with it. Strangely enough this endeared people to her.

Michelle had always loved to travel, and one of her dreams was to backpack through America. It was a country she had a strong affinity for, but now I guess she never will." I said with a limp smile as I remembered what a memory was already.

I rambled on absent-mindedly, neither desiring nor requiring a reply. They considerately allowed me to pour out my heart to them.

"It seems such a terrible waste, such a loss, not only to me but to the world."

"It does seem so senseless, especially someone so young with so much to live for. I wish there were something I could do or say that would make you feel better, but at times like this, words seem so inadequate. Do you have any other children?" he asked.

"Yes, I have two younger daughters back in Sydney, and I absolutely adore them, but they will never replace Michelle. One child can't replace another. We were more like sisters. The age difference between us wasn't that great. Michelle was like a star that shone brighter than the rest. She was like a magnet that drew people to her unconsciously and held them spellbound in her company. I know this sounds like a mother talking, and you're probably thinking I'm biased, but I would often glance over at her at a party and she would have unwittingly attracted a group of people who were drawn to her. Tell me, how could all of that vibrant energy and charisma just disappear off the face of the earth? Where has she gone?" I said, knowing they were unable to supply the answers.

"She sounds like a wonderful girl. I wish I'd had the opportunity of meeting her. It must be so painful for you. There are no simple answers when something like this happens. You just have to believe she's safe and in good hands."

"It's that very belief that has carried me through this tragedy. I do have faith and believe she is in heaven with Yahshua," I affirmed.

"If you have faith, you have everything! Keep hold of that. It will see you through. What are your plans now? Have you made any?"

"No, I had all my hopes pinned on your being able to organize another search, but you've just told me that's out of the question. So there's little else that I can do here. Only I can't face going home just yet. I think I'll stay here for a while to put my thoughts in order and try to come to terms with this before I must go home and break this devastating news to my children. They only have me to rely on. I'll have to be the strong one, to comfort them though the loss of their big sister and help ease their pain. It destroys me to think of how this will affect their lives. This will seem so unjust to them. How will they ever trust in anything again? It's too awful to even think about."

"You'll still have each other, and in time you will all heal and learn to trust again. The best thing for you to do now is take it easy and rest. We will assist you in any way we can. No doubt you will need replacement passports, tickets, and travellers cheques, and we'll see to it that these are organized for you."

"Thanks very much. I feel too upset at the moment to even think about anything else. Right now, all I want to do is go to bed and sleep and not have to face any of this."

"Under the circumstances, that's completely understandable. Do you have any sedatives to calm you?"

"I did have a couple of sleeping pills but I have taken those already."

"We'll get a doctor to call on you in the morning if you like. He will be able to prescribe something to help calm your nerves."

"Thanks, I think that would help."

"I'm sorry to have to bring up the subject at a time like this but it has to be tackled. No doubt you will be travelling back to Australia soon, so I must ask you. I'm sure you realize the chances of Michelle's body being found are remote. It's an enormous ocean out there and it's highly unlikely, but if she is found, what procedures would you like us to take? Would you prefer her body to be sent back to Australia so she can be buried at home?"

His words plunged into my heart like a dagger. My darling girl was now being referred to as a corpse. A tormented scream rose in my throat, and I was unable to answer him. How could he expect me to answer such a gruesome question? At that moment I wished the ground would open and swallow me up.

The sound of ringing bells reached my ears as if they were coming through a hazy fog. Mr. Frazer's words barely penetrated the sanctuary where I had retreated inside myself, unable to deal with this cruel reality.

"Excuse me for a moment. I have to answer the telephone."

Left alone with the questions reverberating around me, I felt as if I had been thrust into a spiralling black tunnel that had no end. Thank God, the phone had rung and prevented me from answering him, because to do that would be to accept her as dead and lost to us forever. I couldn't believe this had happened to Michelle, the baby that had grown inside me, the tiny creature I had nurtured at my breast, the one I had watched tenderly grow step by step into womanhood, the human being I knew more intimately than any other on earth.

"Michelle, where are you? If only you could come back and tell me that you are all right, I could spend the rest of my days in peace. If by chance you can see me or hear me now, please know that I love you dearly and will always miss you terribly. Goodbye, my darling. My thoughts and love are with you always." I wept.

The sound of heavy footsteps snapped me out of my thoughts. George's ecstatic voice shattered the gloomy silence.

"Rachelle! Your daughter is alive! Michelle's alive! They found her floating out in the middle of the ocean. It's an absolute miracle, but she's been rescued by Filipino fishermen and apparently is alive and has escaped without serious injury."

Rising to my feet in triumph, I threw my hands into the air as a fountain of profound joy burst forth from within me. Tears of intense relief and thankfulness flowed from me. An absolute miracle had been performed by the living God!

With arms outstretched toward heaven I cried out loud, "Praise God! Oh thank you, Yahshua, thank you for saving Michelle."

OUT OF THE DARKNESS - 21

MICHELLE...2:00PM SUNDAY MARCH 12, MANILA

It was now 5 days since my bunca had been swept to sea from Boracay Island. On wobbly legs that barely supported me I finally stepped onto truly dry land . . . Manila! A multitude of outstretched hands reached for mine, assisting me off the boat. Instantly I began to feel dizzy and disoriented, fearing that I would collapse if I didn't sit down. A mass of people swarmed around me, directing questions to me at machine-gun pace. Remembering my rescuers, I turned back to wave a last goodbye to the men who had saved my life and delivered me to this destination.

A woman in the crowd strode purposefully towards me; she was obviously Mr. Bobby del Rosario's sister. Thank goodness someone was here to help me! She recognized me immediately, probably because I was the only fair-headed, sun burnt person among them.

"Are you Miss Michelle?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'm so pleased to meet you. I'm Susan. My brother Bobby Del Rosario, who is the owner of your rescue ship the *Alyss Star*, told me what happened to you. I just can't believe it! It's so amazing that you survived all that time without food or water."

"Yes," I nodded agreeing with her, too exhausted to make conversation.

"Anyway, there is plenty of time to tell your story later. My brother told me you urgently need to get a message to your mother on Boracay Island."

"Yes, that's right. She doesn't yet know I'm alive," I conveyed anxiously.

"Do you want us to take you to the hospital? I think you need medical assistance."

"No, my injuries are mostly superficial. I may need treatment for the burns but right now I just need to contact the Australian embassy."

"I will take you to the Coast Guard Station first where you can report everything."

Sitting in the Coast Guard Station I waited to speak to the correct person.

"Miss Michelle." The sound of my name being called out brought me back to the core of my problem. "The lieutenant is out of the office for about half an hour on business. Do you wish to wait for him?"

"It seems I have little choice." I said, trying to conceal my frustration that someone wasn't available to help.

"Well, Susan, if I am going to have to wait for half an hour, do you think I could possibly use their telephone directory? I want to alert the Australian Embassy and call the airport. This way I'll be able to find out if my Mum has left Boracay Island."

Before she had time to answer, the officer in charge came to my aid, having overheard me. He escorted me over to the table where I sat down while he brought me the telephone directories. Without thinking I opened the cover and started with the A's for Australian Embassy. It suddenly dawned on me that the directory was printed in English not Tagalog as

I had expected. Thank goodness for that! I located the number quite easily and dialed it immediately.

I felt a flutter of raw nerves buzz inside my stomach. I was about to speak to someone from home, who understood me perfectly and had the power to help me. What a glorious sense of relief this would be! After the first couple of rings a recorded message came on the line saying 'I'm sorry but the Australian Embassy is closed at the moment and the phone is unattended. If you call back on Monday to Friday between the hours of 8:30am and 4:30pm our office will be open then.'

No! It suddenly occurred to me that it was Sunday, and nobody would be there. Now what was I going to do? I racked my brain for an answer while the message droned on. I was at a total loss as to what to do next and was about to hang up the phone when the taped voice stated if there was a real emergency—and they emphasized this—then I should leave my name, number and the reason for my call and they would get back to me as soon as possible. I questioned myself - did I fit into the category of emergency? It automatically struck me as what a stupid question this was. How much more desperate did a situation have to get before it was classified as an emergency? Yes, of course, this applied to me. The phone beeped, signaling me that it was ready for me to leave my message. Suddenly I was at a loss for words. I didn't know where to begin. Embarrassed, I hung up the phone and thought about what I was going to say and where I could be contacted. I had no idea which hotel or, for that matter, where I would be at all. The most reliable and convenient place where I could be contacted was right here at the Coast Guard station.

I asked the officer to write down the phone number and address and proceeded to call again. This time armed with the correct information, I related my ordeal and my urgent need to contact my mother, who I believed was still on Boracay Island. Now that I had dealt with that important task I felt some measure of relief; however there was still one more job to do before I could relax and that was to call the airlines. I carefully extracted our still damp and partially disintegrated airline tickets from my money belt. With difficulty I studied



Mum's British Airways ticket, barely able to read the smudged type. As I held it between my shaking fingers, I guessed that she wouldn't have flown home to Australia yet; which meant she was still on Boracay Island or had flown to Manila.

I decided to call Philippine Airlines first to check whether my mother had flown from Boracay to Manila in the past few days. I read out Mum's passport number but didn't have much luck with her ticket as several of the numbers were illegible. The receptionist reassured me that I had given her sufficient information but that it would take awhile to verify if the ticket had been used. An eternity seemed to have passed as I waited for her to come back to the phone. Now that I was compelled to sit still, I began to feel

awfully nauseous. I realized I needed food to strengthen me as I hadn't eaten more than two mangoes and a few spoonfuls of rice in more than five days. I felt extremely weak and knew it would take a lot more than one meal and a good night's sleep to repair my depleted body and return me to my former good health. However, something to eat would sustain me for the next undoubtedly grueling hours.

Without warning dizziness surged through me, and a loud throbbing noise began to ring in my ears. I closed my eyes momentarily, it was dark like a black screen which abruptly became covered in a mass of twinkling stars which flashed on and off as they whizzed around inside my head. I tried repeatedly to erase these stars and refocus my eyes, but it was hopeless. I experienced the sensation of spiraling downward and knew I was about to blackout. Crunch! The phone fell from my hand onto the table, shattering the silence with a loud clang and the elbow which had been supporting me slipped from under my chin; my head slumped forward. I immediately sensed people beside me and a hand was placed on my forehead.

"Are you okay? Is everything all right?" they asked me with concern as they lifted me upright.

Disconnecting myself from the fuzzy haze that had overpowered me, I forced myself to answer "Yes, I'm all right," dispelling their fears for me.

"Would you like to lie down?" one of the officers kindly asked me, seeing the evidence of my weakened state. I felt myself yielding to his suggestion and almost said yes. There was nothing in the world I longed for more than to lie down and sleep without the fear of dying, yet still I had to endure until these tasks had been taken care of.

"No, I won't thank you, but I would like a glass of water please," I asked, hoping it would revive me long enough till I would be able to get something substantial to eat. He scurried off and returned with a large, cool glass of water.

"Hello, hello. Is anybody there?" I heard a faint voice calling through the telephone receiver.

Jarred back to the purpose of my call I picked up the hand piece and apologized, explaining that I had accidentally dropped the phone. "What did you find out?" I asked eagerly, waiting to hear some news that would confirm or deny my assumptions.

"Well, the data on the computer says that the ticket is still unused, although it is possible she may have purchased another ticket from a different airline."

I wondered if that were likely; to my knowledge she had no money as I had all our cash and travelers' checks in my money belt. Perhaps someone on the island had lent her fare to Manila? My mind assimilated this information and calculated the likelihood of this being the case. I couldn't think; it was all speculation, and I doubted I would get any further information from the airline inquiries clerk.

"Oh well, thank you for your help," I said, disappointed that neither of my phone calls had resulted in bringing me closer in my search for Mum.

I heard a motor vehicle pull up, and a car door slammed. A Filipino man with short, sleek black hair entered the station. Although he was not overly tall, his presence commanded attention; he was obviously the lieutenant. Striding over to the officer on duty, he conferred with him for several minutes then threw a surprised glance in my direction and strode into his office.



Susan explained to me rather apologetically that she would have to now leave me in the care of the lieutenant because she had to pick up her little girl. Obliging, she offered to return later and help me find a suitable hotel for me to spend the night. I thanked her and told her not to worry, that I would catch a taxi to the nearest hotel possible. Susan told me that her brother would be in contact with me as soon as I was rested and felt well enough. He wished to meet the mermaid his employees had gallantly rescued!

He introduced himself as Lt. Del Rosario. "Well, Michelle, I know you must be exhausted, but I need to ask you some questions about how this happened."

After about 1 and a half hours of questioning Lt. Del Rosario said, "Well, Michelle, we have completed the formalities here. Would you like to get something to eat? You must be very hungry."

"Now that you mention it I'm absolutely famished. I haven't been able to relax enough to think about food until I had relieved my mind of the nagging duty to inform my mother I was alive."

Taking hold of my arm he helped me from my chair and we walked into the foyer. I asked Lt. Fernando Del Rosario to leave a message with his officers that if the Australian Embassy called to tell them I was out getting something to eat and as soon as I knew the hotel where I would be staying, I would call here at the Coast Guard station and leave the necessary details with them. The Lieutenant translated all this to his officer, who nodded his head in acknowledgment. He held the door of the taxi open for me as I stumbled into it ungracefully in the oversized thongs I had been given by one of the coast guards.

Walking out through the throngs of people, without warning I was struck with an extraordinary sensation: Here I was a part of the human traffic again. Yet I felt apart and separate from these people, as if I didn't belong to the human race anymore. Aside from the severe burns on my face and the staggering gait, I wondered if anyone guessed the catastrophic ordeal I had managed to escape from. I felt different; surely I must look different! Because I had nothing to wear other than a bikini and shorts, Lt. Del Rosario gave me a t-shirt to wear, compliments of the coast guard station.

My phenomenal journey to the brink of death brought me to the outstanding discovery that God was real. I had talked personally to the Creator of the universe and saw the undeniable supernatural miracles He had performed for my eyes only; then in an instant I had been deposited back to the land of the living. How could I not be transformed forever by what I had lived through? It was indelibly carved on my mind for all time. I could never turn back the clock. I could never erase the past four days. Would I ever feel I belonged to this earth again? Would I ever be an average, normal person? At this moment I doubted it. In an instant I had been plugged back into the mundane world of daily living. From my observation people appeared to be walking around in a state of deathly sleepwalk.



I felt as if I were the only person who appreciated being alive. I wanted to shake them, wake them up, and tell them to be glad to be alive; to take hold of their lives and live in joy in the fullness of this wonderful gift. But, no, they wouldn't understand. Would anybody? I intuitively felt that God had a plan for my life and He would expect me to be faithful to that promise I made Him—that I would devote the rest of my life to serving Him in repayment for restoring my life to me.

The burger left me feeling satisfied and marginally better. We left the restaurant in search of the second most urgent need on my agenda - a hotel; which meant a refreshing shower and blessed sleep in a proper bed. I couldn't wait! Darkness had now fallen over the city and the streets of Manila were lit up like a Christmas tree. The city pulsed with vitality and the sidewalks were crammed to capacity with thousands of smiling, exuberant faces. Clubs, pubs, and restaurants were on every corner, beckoning business their way. The teeming crowds of people were a swarm of action like the drones in a hive. I instinctively sensed an undercurrent of danger and was pleased I was not walking the unfamiliar streets of Manila alone, but that Lt. del Rosario was still wearing his official-looking uniform, escorting me.

We looked for a suitable hotel, which was difficult to find as I had no money now, having given all of it to the crew on the boat. My ID was not much better. Many of the hotel owners did not want to rent me a room, with a promise I would pay soon; so we had to keep going from place to place, each one getting more hideous and run down. As we continued to search, I suddenly became aware that every fiber of my being was saturated with exhaustion. Reality became a distorted daze. Even my vision was clouded by a hazy veil.

Beneath me my trembling legs refused to carry the weight of my lifeless body any further, threatening to give way at any moment. Buckling at every step I had to fight to command them to keep moving. *'Just a bit longer,'* I cajoled my aching limbs. My weary lids fluttered closed as I walked along the streets of Manila, opening again only when the lieutenant directed a question at me. I responded with monosyllabic answers, and then returned to my thoughts of what a relief it would be to finally be alone.

My need to be cared for was paramount. Instantly a yearning for Mum came over me. I felt as if I had reverted to a sick and helpless child, totally reliant on the care and attention I knew only my mother could give me. I imagined her washing my hair, soothing away the pain in my body with the touch of loving hands. No request would be too great. She would lather my skin with moisturizer and then she would make me a cup of chicken soup and tuck me into bed. I blissfully imagined myself crawling into the haven of sleep and hibernating for six months. How dearly I wished her to be here with me. *Soon, I thought, soon we will be together!* She would give me all that special attention and love that only a mother can.

Thank God, I would now have the opportunity to say all the things I should have and tell her how very privileged I was to have her as my mother—appreciation we children don't express enough. Only when we are threatened with losing something we love can we fully appreciate its value as we should have in the first place. I was extremely fortunate to have been given a second chance. I never again would go without telling those around me how much I loved and appreciated them.

The lieutenant's voice broke into my chain of thought as he said, "Let's try this one."

A hotel loomed up in front of me. At this stage I didn't care if it was a cowshed if I was able to lie down and sleep. This time Lt. Fernando booked me into the hotel under his name this time and paid for the room.

My heart took a dive as I read the sign on the elevator, Sorry, Out of Order. This was the last straw! It was all too much for me. I began to shake with an inner rage at the obstacles and complications which seemed to be deliberately hindering me from getting any rest. I felt like doing something childish like throwing a tantrum and smashing a plate, which would do absolutely no good but would have the desired effect of making me feel better. I wanted to scream out my distress and have someone carry me up those flights of stairs that I believed I wasn't capable of climbing myself. No, I'd have to endure this one last trial. Just a few more minutes and it would be over and then I could stay in bed for two whole weeks if I wished to. Little did I know what the immediate future held: I was going to be bombarded constantly by the world's press, which would not allow me one minute's peace, let alone two weeks of recuperation!

I asked Lt. Del Rosario "What level are we on so far?"

"Three," he said with a slight grimace, empathizing with me at the test ahead.

I could barely place one foot in front of the other. It was going to take a supreme effort to make it to the sixth level. How am I ever going to get there I questioned myself? *'The same way you left the bunca and swam a mile into the arms of your rescuers on the Alyss Star, when you were suffering from severe exhaustion. I did it then and I can do it now!'*

With that resolve, one by agonizing one, I climbed the stairs, each step a minor victory over my body's determination to give up. The fourth level was difficult, the fifth downright painful and the sixth pure agony. The muscles in my legs were afflicted with an acute burning sensation which I had come to know so well. With my jaws clenched tightly together I gradually ascended the last of the stairs. I felt like one of the walking dead; what spurred me on was the lure of the soft bed that awaited me on the sixth level. The pinnacle of achievement was reached when I placed both feet on the landing of my level.

The lieutenant firmed his grip around my waist, supporting my full weight as he half dragged; half carried me into the room. There before me was a sight for sore eyes - a bed! I staggered over and flopped down onto it like a limp rag doll. I lay there gasping for breath, unable to do anything else but wait patiently until the burning sensation boring into my limbs had subsided.

While I rested the lieutenant adjusted the aerial and attempted to get a clear picture on the archaic black and white television set. It was a tremendous relief having him to help me; however now that I was safe, I had the overwhelming desire to be alone, for even to speak was an effort. I think his perceptive nature sensed this, because immediately after he had handed me a bag of his own personal clothing for me to change into, he made a move to leave. I was about to shake his hand when I realized it was too formal for the occasion. Leaning over I gave him a hug.

Quite surprised at my display of affection and gratitude, he said looking rather embarrassed, "If it's okay with you, Miss Michelle, I'll call you tomorrow morning to see how you are."

"That's fine, I'd like that. You can be my early morning wake-up call, but please don't call too early as I plan to sleep in!" I said attempting to make a joke. "The way I feel now I will probably go into a comatose state and sleep forever."

"I hope not. You get a good night's rest and I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, I'll see myself out."

"Thanks, thanks for everything. Bye."

He disappeared, the door closing softly behind him. Finally, I was alone! This state had proved to be as elusive as drinking water in the ocean over the past two days. It seemed rather ironic that only three days ago at sea I had hungered for human contact, craved for the comfort of conversation, and now all I wanted was to be left alone with my thoughts, the complexity of which made me shudder. I looked longingly at the bed. My immediate needs conflicted with one another. My body cried out for sleep, but I also had the overwhelming desire to be cleaned first. I toyed with which one would be the most beneficial. Being clean took predominance; I knew I would not be able to sleep properly otherwise. However, I decided to take a short rest before attempting the daunting task.

I staggered back toward the bed, flinging garments of clothing off as I went. I gingerly lowered myself onto the bed; my body still a mass of bruises, torn muscles, and burnt skin. It wasn't quite the luxuriously soft bed with the white linen sheets and feather down pillows I had been dreaming of all those long nights at sea, but it was certainly an improvement on the linoleum covered steel floor where I'd slept on the ship. I lay there feeling every ache and pain but nevertheless soaking up the measure of comfort it offered.

The images on the television screen flashed before me. The background hum was reassuring although I wasn't listening. Staring up at the ceiling, I realized that my body was still rocking to the cradle-like motion of the sea. I willed myself to stop! Even now rest eluded me! Churning over and over in my mind was the call to the Coast Guard station which as yet I hadn't made. I had to find out if there was any updated news from Boracay. Had Mum received my message yet? Was the Australian Embassy aware that I had been rescued? Had they received my message?

Lt. Fernando and I had been gone from the Coast Guard station for about two hours; in that time a message could have come through. I knew I should call straight away but I

just didn't think I could go through the rigmarole of explaining yet again my story to whoever answered the phone, especially if they didn't speak English. My best bet was to wait until Lt. Fernando returned and then simply ask him. Yes, that's what I would do!

My eye caught sight of a painting on the wall depicting a tropical scene. The moon shone its illuminating light down on the turquoise water making the foaming surf glisten like a glassy green wall. The palm trees were leaning to one side, their fronds in wild disarray. The scene was that of a stormy night on a tropical island. Gazing at it intently, I felt the bile suddenly rising in my throat. Nausea swept over me; I was going to be sick! Swinging my legs out of bed I hurriedly shuffled my way to the bathroom where I vomited violently several times. After returning to the bedroom I turned the offending painting face to the wall. I just couldn't bear to look at it; the memory of my ordeal was too fresh, like an opened wound which hadn't yet healed.

My entire body felt so dehydrated; the sun had literally sucked every vital juice out of me. I had consumed gallons of water and yet I still felt an unquenchable thirst. My skin had been torched; it craved moisture. A quizzical thought crossed my mind; during the days at sea I didn't fully realize how severely burnt I was. Even my dire thirst had become secondary as the struggle to stay alive dominated every other bodily need. Now every cell in my body demanded immediate attention. Walking back to the bathroom I delved into the bag of toiletries I had purchased on my way to the hotel. I withdrew bottles of shampoo, hair conditioner, toothpaste, soap, and a comb. I had been dreaming about feeling clean for days; it was now within my grasp, only minutes away. I set the temperature at lukewarm and stepped under the deliciously invigorating spray. Even though the water felt like it was burning my sun burnt skin, it was still a sweet relief! The blessed liquid soothed away the aches and pains. How I welcomed this water sprayed over me, contrary to my feelings in the ocean. I stood slowly rotating myself under the jets; at that moment I didn't think anything could eclipse this revitalizing feeling. After this, I would certainly sleep soundly.

Having completely accomplished my cleansing ritual I stepped onto the bathroom scales. Tentatively, I watched on as the numbers swayed, finally settling on 110 pounds. This was nothing short of staggering, for in three days I had lost twelve pounds. I laughed inwardly to myself, '*Trust me to do it the hard way!*' Now I could finally rest. Lying down I closed my eyes and prayed I would not have any nightmares about my 3 days at sea.

The sound of the phone ringing interrupted my twilight sleep. I picked up the jangling instrument.

"Hello? Hello? Is this Michelle Hamilton?"

"Yes, speaking," I answered. It was strange to be using the telephone again.

"This is Mr. George Frazer from the Australian Embassy. I have someone here who wants to speak to you."

My intuition immediately told me it was Mum. A tightness gripped my throat as I waited for her to come on the line. Would she be overwhelmed with happiness and relief or hysterical and angry with me for going out on the boat alone when she had expressly told me not to go out too far?

"Michelle, is that you?" she said in a voice that betrayed her emotional state.

"Yes, Mum, it's me."

"Thank God, you're alive! I couldn't be absolutely convinced until I had heard your voice for myself. It's unbelievable! You're not hurt, are you?"

"Well, I don't think seriously. Very burnt but I still have all my limbs and I'm alive, so, yes I'm okay!"

"I just can't believe you are alive and in Manila. It's truly amazing—I never thought I would see you again. Praise Yahshua for this miracle. This is surely an act of God."

"You have no idea how true that is. I have so much to tell you Mum, you won't believe it!"

Mum's voice was quivering with emotion and disbelief as I gave her the name and room number of my hotel. Propping myself up on the pillows I waited anxiously for Mum to arrive. How desperately I had longed to see her when I was at sea; now that the moment was almost here I felt peculiarly apprehensive. Would she be angry at me, or would the relief that I was alive and well overshadow all the other emotions? I hoped it would be the latter.

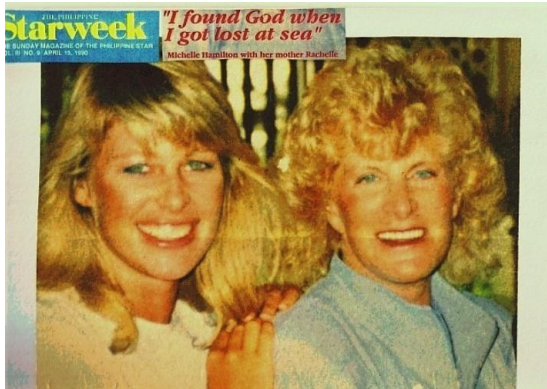
The physical and mental exhaustion over the past few days had left my mind blank; it was as if a wall has come down and blocked out what was too terrifying to remember. I was too scared to think about what had happened because to do that would cause me to re-experience all the terror I had finally escaped from. At this stage I did not dare retrace my steps down the petrifying path which I had traveled.

It was a surreal feeling just to lie here in idleness without having to fight for my survival. I found the inactivity threatening; as soon as I shut my eyes I felt myself back at sea, especially as my body continued to sway to the rhythm of the ocean's waves. I was exhausted to the depths of my soul but the horrible feeling of being back in the ocean made me will myself to stay awake.

I could not wait to tell Mum everything that had happened to me in the ocean and that she was right about Yahshua being the Messiah. Wow. GOD is real and true to His word to those who believe in Him! I called out to HIM just as she had told me to do if I was ever in trouble, and HE had heard me and saved me. Once I was lost and now I was found, both physically and spiritually. It was YHWH's amazing grace that saved me.

Why He chose to save me can only be understood in the light of the scriptures which I have now studied since returning home to Australia. **For this purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be declared in all the earth for My own name sake. (Exodus 9:16)**

EPILOGUE



Alyss Star, Michelle and Rachelle returned to Australia where they were reunited with Rachelle's two younger daughters, Angeline and Natalie. During the following eighteen months, Michelle and Rachelle wrote this account of their ordeal giving testimony to God's grace and power. They currently reside in the Brisbane, Australia.

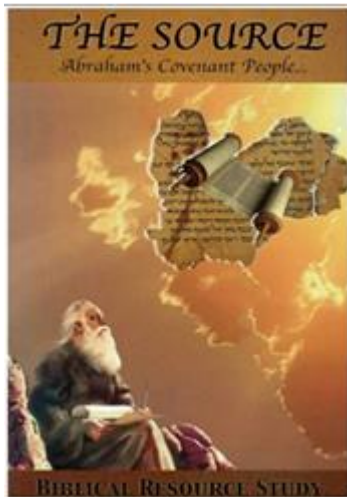
Michelle was then requested to embark upon telling her remarkable experience to a wide variety of mediums. From schools, churches, radio stations, magazines, to being a guest speaker at many varying events. Michelle and Rachelle were interviewed on Good morning Australia, and the Midday Show and CBN 700 Club. They appeared in an exclusive magazine story with the Woman's Day magazine.

During the following 18 months, together they wrote the book of their ordeal, giving testimony to God's grace and power. They flew to America where they secured a publisher who first printed the book in hard cover format. Michelle and Rachelle have now produce 'Saved At Sea' in a soft cover format and e book.

During the 6 months in America in 1991, Michelle and Rachelle shared the testimony on 100



radio and 12 television stations, sharing the message of having 100% Faith! in God, in the midst of a storm. While there, they agreed to have Readers Digest take an excerpt from the book and publish it internationally in their book section in 1992. The story entitled 'Swept to Sea' appeared in the Readers Digest, in 27 countries, in 18 languages. This has been a powerful witness of God's saving grace and miraculous power.



Rachelle has since published 6 books. Her second book is titled 'The Source' Abraham's Covenant People – The Final Chapter. This book is being widely used by churches around the world as a biblical study reference manual and is highly recommended. She has also published 4 booklets called the Epistles to the Jews, revealing how Yahshua is their long-awaited Messiah. These booklets have been written to the Glory of the Almighty, that all men should know Him and His eternal promises. It has been written with the very best of intentions, that in these end times we might conform ourselves to the truth of the Eternal Scriptures.

Out in the ocean, Michelle made a promise to serve YHWH and faithfully bring this message to the nations. Michelle and Rachelle share the gospel around the world about the God that rescues us; not just from the ocean, but from the storms of life and the hungry human sharks that surround us. Reminding people that 'Greater is Jesus in us, than he that is in the world.'

Michelle joined with a Pastor Jered Ramada in the Philippines to do ministry work and has since become the director of Bridge of Compassion Ministries which rescues children and looks after them, tribal missions, prison ministries, feeding the poor and bible distribution. Michelle and Rachelle reside in the Brisbane, Australia, but spend much of their time travelling the world, sharing the message of having 100% Faith! In GOD. Michelle is married and has 2 adult children Asher and Grace.

To watch the DVD testimony of Michelle on Youtube click this link
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3E7eR1vDNq>

To watch the DVD testimony of Rachelle on Youtube click this link
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcR2Cvr6DAw>

To find out more information about them and their ministries go to the website.
www.jonahministries.com.au

SALVATION PRAYER

You may be adrift in a sea of loneliness, depression, fear and guilt; until in humility and desperation, you realize your total dependence on God. Even from within a mighty tempest, you can experience the infinite love of your Creator and cry out, "I need you Yahshua (Jesus) to be Lord of my life!" He will hear. He will save.

Romans 10:13 All those that call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

John 14:6 I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father, except through me.

YAHSHUA/JESUS IS THE SON OF YHWH/GOD

HE LIVED A SINLESS LIFE AND THEN HE DIED

ON THE CROSS

TO PAY THE PENALTY FOR OUR SIN

YHWH DEMONSTRATES HIS LOVE FOR US,

IN THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS

THE SON OF GOD DIED FOR US.

YAHSHUA ROSE FROM THE DEAD AND NOW

HE LIVES IN HEAVEN, WITH GOD HIS FATHER.

YAHSHUA OFFERS US THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE

OF LIVING WITH HIM FOREVER IN HEAVEN

IF WE ACCEPT YAHSHUA AS OUR MESSIAH AND SAVIOR.

AND REPENT OF YOUR SINS, YOU WILL RECEIVE

ETERNAL LIFE

PRAY THIS PRAYER

YAHSHUA HAMASHIACH/JESUS

I BELIEVE YOU ARE THE SON OF YHWH/GOD AND

YOU DIED FOR ME ON THE CROSS AND THROUGH

YOUR SHED BLOOD,

YOU PAID THE DEBT FOR MY SIN, THAT I MAY

RECIEVE ETERNAL LIFE.

THANK YOU FOR DYING ON THE CROSS FOR MY SINS

I PROMISE TO TURN AWAY FROM MY SIN AND FORGIVE

ALL PEOPLE WHO HAVE SINNED AGAINST ME.

CLEANSE ME NOW BY YOUR PRECIOUS BLOOD

I NOW OPEN THE DOOR OF MY HEART,

THAT YOU WILL COME AND DWELL WITH ME.

LEAD ME, GUIDE ME AND HELP ME WALK IN YOUR WAYS.

FROM NOW ON I BELONG TO YOU AND HAVE

BECOME A PART OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF YHWH/GOD.

I AM NOW A NEW CREATION BORN FROM ABOVE.

I ASK YOU TO SEND YOUR HOLY SPIRIT (RUACH HAKODOSH)

TO PROTECT ME AND GUIDE ME.

AMEN.