

November-
Charlie

Clare Revell

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Dedication

To Mr. Ede my Year Nine English teacher. Whose creative writing project spawned this story.

It's had many names over the years and sat on my hard drive over many computers. It began life as Island in the Sun. With pictures drawn by my sister and gothic lettered chapter titles which took hours to trace and color in. And as all our English work, was done in fountain pen.

And to Lynne. It took so many years, but it's finally in print

Thanks to:

Julieta Rovi de Lanterman, MBA at the Panama Canal Authority for answering my questions and sending me loads of useful information on charges and procedures for traversing the Panama Canal.

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Dad who told me where the © symbol was.

Lynne for her assistance with the medical bits.

Steph for her USAF knowledge

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The shrill, urgent jangle of the phone shattered the darkness and echoed through the small flat. Fifteen-year-old Lou Benson jerked awake, her heart pounding. She glanced at the glowing green numbers on the clock. Three o'clock. The phone never brought good news, especially at night.

Lou sat up in bed and pulled Deefer, her Sheltie, towards her as the phone stopping ringing. Mum must have gotten it.

Thirteen-year-old Staci Kirk sat on the bed beside her. "Maybe Mum forgot the time difference again," she said. "The Philippines are a long way away."

"Maybe." She shot Staci a slight smile. "Give Jim a count of ten, and he'll be in here."

Staci grinned. "Maybe five. He was planning on staying up late to watch the wrestling."

Lou laughed. "He won't last, you know that." It had just been her, Mum and Deefer for a long time, until Staci and her older brother, Jim, came to stay whilst their parents, Di and Bill Kirk, were working abroad as missionaries.

Normally, Jim and Staci went with them and attended the mission school, but this time Di decided they'd be better off in England and as her only living relative, "crusty Aunt Edith", wouldn't have them, Di asked if they could stay here.

Mum had said yes, and for once she and Lou agreed on something. It meant Jim was living under the same roof as her for a while. Jim was seventeen, cute and perhaps now that she was in his face every day, he would finally pay her some attention. 'Sides they all got on well, while she and her mum...not so much.

There was a tap on the door. "Come in, Jim."

He opened the door, and ran a hand through his tousled brown hair. His blue eyes sparkled despite the early hour. "How did you know it was me?"

"Easy, Mum's on the phone. Any idea what's going on?"

He shook his head. "No. Since it could be private, figured I'd come sit in here as we're all awake now."

Footsteps echoed in the lounge, and the TV clicked on. There was a long silence broken only by the sound the TV and stifled sobs.

Lou's stomach twisted.

"Stay here. I'll go see what's going on." She ran down the hallway, not surprised when the others followed her anyway. "What's happened? Who was on the phone?"

Mum looked up, her eyes red. She hastily wiped a hand over her cheeks to hide the fact she'd been crying. "There's been an earthquake in the Philippines."

Lou swallowed hard. "What?"

Jim pushed past her. "How big was it? What about Mum and Dad? Are they safe?"

"It was a seven point nine, about ten miles off the coast. The area your parents were in was hardest hit. They've issued a tsunami warning for the entire area."

Jim sank onto the sofa, gazing at the TV.

Staci sat next to him, gripping his hand tightly.

Lou blinked hard, not wanting to cry, but feeling the sting of tears. "Who was on the phone? Di?"

"The mission society. They wanted to tell me before I saw it on the news. And to see if Di *had* rung."

"Guess they haven't called. They were in a pretty remote part of the country." Hope flashed in Jim's eyes.

"Not yet." Mum managed a smile. "I'm sure they will when they can. But it may be a day or two. The phone lines are probably down all over the place."

Lou watched the images on TV. Buildings turned into huge piles of rubble. People wandered the streets, crying, and looking for loved ones. Occasionally someone would stop and talk with the reporters.

Mum hugged her. "You should go back to bed, the three of you. There's nothing more we can do now. I'll let you know soon as I hear something."

"But it's not like there's school tomorrow. It's half term so we've got the whole week off."

"I know, but you three still need to sleep."

"K." Lou went back to the room she shared with Staci. "How are we meant to sleep now?"

Staci shrugged and sat on Lou's bed. Staci curled up next to her as Lou strained to listen to the TV through the wall.

~*~

Jim sat on Staci's bed, waiting for her to wake. He hadn't been able to sleep, instead he'd turned the TV volume low and watched the news coverage until just before seven. He wasn't supposed to go in the girls' room, but he had to make sure his sister was OK.

Lou woke and sat up in the same movement. "Jim? Is there any news?"

"The whole area's been destroyed," he managed, even though he felt as breathless as if someone had just punched him in the stomach. "There was a massive tsunami. Not as big as the one in Japan or Indonesia, but..." He sucked in a deep breath. "They say hundreds, maybe thousands missing or dead."

Lou rose to hug him tightly. "I'm sorry."

Jim tried to speak, but what could he say? His whole world had been shattered in the space of a few seconds. He just nodded and returned to the lounge where Nichola sat watching the TV. Tears ran down her face.

Nichola looked up as Lou walked in, tears evident on her face. "Hi, love."

"Is there any more news, Mum?"

She shook her head. "No, there's been no communication. But that doesn't mean they're amongst the dead or missing or injured."

"Are they all right?" Staci, too, entered the lounge. Her dark eyes were wide and shock was etched on her face as she stared at the images on the TV screen. "Have they called?"

"No, not yet." Jim held out his hand to her and she took it. He shoved his feelings to one side. He had to be strong for his sister.

"Why not? Don't they know we'll be worried?"

"There's too much damage for the phones to work. I'm sure they'll ring when they can." He held Staci close as her small body shook with sobs. Jim glanced heavenward before he stared at the TV. *God, they were out there working for You, he prayed angrily. It's not fair. Why take them away when we need them?*

~*~

The next three days dragged, made longer by the fact his parents hadn't called.

Jim, like his sister and Lou, remained glued to the TV, anxious for any news.

More earthquakes followed, a six point five, followed by several smaller ones. Eventually the coverage slowed.

Jim tried to deal with the lack of news and growing death toll like a man, but, he wasn't coping as well as he pretended.

Staci cried constantly. She barely slept, and when she did it wasn't peaceful. Since the quake, she woke, bathed in perspiration and tears at least twice every night, crying for her mother. When anyone tried to comfort her, Staci usually pushed them away.

Finally, after the girls had gone to bed, he got the news he'd been dreading. He closed the laptop and pushed up from the sofa. He headed slowly to the girls room. Voices came from within and he paused, his hand raised to knock. The door was slightly ajar and he could see into the room.

"Lou? Read to me? I know I'm technically too old, but I like that one where I can choose which way the story goes." Staci had always loved those books. Dad had bought her the entire set, all fifteen of them.

"Sure."

He waited as Lou took the book from the nightstand that separated the two beds and Staci got settled.

"Simone skipped down the path, little knowing that the wicked stepmother was following her to find

out where she went each evening. Just as she reached the fork in the road, she bent to pick it up, wondering why on earth someone had left a fork there in the first place. Suddenly there—

Staci giggled.

Three light raps made Lou jump.

“Suddenly there was a knock.” Staci said and giggled again.

“Yeah, there was...spooky...come in.”

The door creaked open and Jim stuck his head round the door. “Are you two still awake?”

“No, we’re fast asleep,” Lou replied.

“That’s OK, then.” Jim jumped onto Staci’s bed and ruffled her hair.

“I miss Mum and Dad. Wish they’d call.”

“I know.” He hugged her close. “So do I, but you have Lou, me, and Nichola.”

Staci clung to him and Lou paused from reading.

Jim took a deep breath, best get it out. “I was reading the news on the internet. They’ve called off the search for survivors of the tsunami.”

“They can’t,” Lou gasped.

“But Mum and Dad are still missing,” Staci whimpered.

“I know.” Jim gazed at Lou as Staci buried her face in his shirt and started sobbing again.

“How can they just give up?” Lou demanded. “There are still thousands missing.”

Jim shrugged.

“I’m so sorry.” She leapt onto Staci’s bed and threw her arms round both of them. “Big hug,” she said.

Staci kept crying.

“Can Jim sleep here, please?” Staci patted the bed

next to her.

“So long as he doesn’t snore,” Lou deadpanned. “And just this once. Mum would throw a blue fit and go up in smoke if she knew.”

“I think I can manage not to snore,” Jim answered. “And I’ll be gone before Nichola gets up.” He snuggled next to his sister.

Lou went back to her own bed. “That’s not very manly. You look like a teddy bear.”

Jim smiled faintly, he knew his eyes were red rimmed. “Do I growl like one, too?”

“Only in the morning. Light on or off, Stace?”

“On.”

Lou nodded and lay down.

Jim was grateful it was the weekend and they didn’t have to be up early for school. How could they call off the search? Now what would happen to him and Staci?

~*~

Saturday morning, Jim found the girls lying on their backs in the communal gardens with the dog between them, listening to some song or other on Lou’s phone.

Jim sat down by their feet. “You two got a minute?”

“You’re blocking the sun,” Lou told him. “Lie down, mate.”

Jim lowered onto the girl’s blanket. “I’ve spoken to Nichola. The mission society has stopped looking for Mum and Dad.” He kicked at the grass with the toe of his shoe. “But I can’t just give up like that. I want to do something. I just don’t know what.” Jim stretched his

arms wide and encountered a warm body. "Oh, sorry, who did I hit?"

"Deefer," Lou replied. "Oh, look, you've upset him, Jim."

Deefer sat with his back to Jim ignoring him. He was such a funny dog. So very much like his mistress.

"Sorry Deefer. I didn't mean it, honest." The dog turned and offered his paw. Jim shook it. At least he didn't sulk as long as his mistress did.

"How about we go and look for them by ourselves?" Staci sat up.

"Don't be silly, sis."

Deefer started licking Jim intently, and he pushed the dog away. "Look, Deefer. I have had one wash today; I don't need another one, thank you."

"Not being silly. Just because I'm littler than you don't mean I can't help do grown up stuff sometimes."

"Doesn't mean," Jim corrected.

Staci sighed. "Whatever..."

"It's not possible." Jim stood. *But that didn't mean he couldn't go.* "Come on. Let's take Deefer for a walk."

~*~

Deefer kept close to Lou's heels as they headed off down the road. He had been a birthday present nine years ago, and they had been inseparable ever since Lou had rescued him from next door's cat when he was a puppy. His name had started off as a joke and had stuck. *D* for dog—Deefer.

Lou enjoyed the sunshine and the mild weather as they strolled the short distance to Riverside Park and down towards the water.

Deefer strained at his lead until Lou unclipped it.

Leaves on the trees flapped lazily in the slight breeze as they walked underneath them.

"Can't believe it's June next week," Lou said. "Maybe we'll get a summer this year to make a change." She paused as they reached the children's play area for the under twelve's.

"Remember when Dad used to push me high? It felt like I was flying." Staci's gaze went to an empty swing set. "Jim, would you push me now?" she asked quietly

"Sure, kiddo. Come on." He unlocked the gate and the two of them went in.

Lou remained with Deefer as Staci climbed higher and higher. Her long black hair trailed behind her, but instead of smiling, tears poured down her face. Lou signaled to Jim there was something wrong and he let the swing slow to a stop.

Jim gathered his sister into his arms, joined Lou and Deefer, and they all crossed to a bench by the river and sat.

Staci's arms remained tightly clamped around Jim's neck, her hair falling over his shoulders.

"Come on, kiddo," he said gruffly.

Lou averted her eyes as she realized how close to tears Jim was.

After a few minutes, Staci slid off Jim's lap and wedged between them, pushing her hair behind her ears. She took the tissues Lou had fished from her pocket.

"Thanks." Staci wiped her eyes, blew her nose furiously and stood up. "Come on," she said. "Deefer wants his walk."

Deefer ran happily on the path along the riverbank, investigating every blade of grass and tree

in the hope of finding something to chase, so long as it wasn't a rabbit or a cat, since he was afraid of both.

Jim skimmed stones across the surface of the water and tried, unsuccessfully to teach her and Staci to do it.

Lou laughed at her attempts, but even with that, Staci didn't even raise a smile. "It's not a crime to smile, Stace. We won't think any less of you."

"Got nothing to smile about."

"Things will get better," Lou told her. "They have to."

"You have your mum and a home, Lou. I don't. They left me and now they're dead."

"Just because no one found them yet, doesn't mean they're dead. They're just missing—"

"Shut up. You don't know anything." Staci yelled.

Lou's eyes filled with tears and her stomach twisted. *She did know*. More than most people did.

Jim grabbed Staci's arm gently. "Hey, kiddo." he told her. "We will get through this. I miss them too." He held her gaze. "And remember, Lou knows just how you feel. Her dad died. Dad's just lost, right now. He'll come back. Rob won't."

"Lou? I'm sorry," Staci began. "It's just..."

Lou turned and gave Staci a hug. "It's OK. You don't need to explain. I'm not just your friend, I think of you as a sister, and I'll always be here for you. Want to take Deefer's leash for a while?"

"Sure." Staci took the lead and ran on ahead.

As soon as she had gone out of earshot, Jim gazed at Lou. "I'm worried they'll put us into care."

"Where'd that come from? Mum said you could stay with us."

"Only while Mum and Dad were on the mission field and only because Aunt Edith refused to have us.

Your flat's not really big enough. I can't stay in the dining room forever. And our house got sold."

"It did? I thought it was being rented out, the same as usual."

"No. Dad sold it. Said it was silly keeping it, and we'd buy something new when they came back to England permanently. Besides, between you and me, the rent they got for it didn't cover the mortgage payment."

"Ah. Well, that makes sense, then."

"I have some money saved, but nowhere near enough for a house."

"I'm sure Mum won't kick you out. You and Staci are all the family we have left—" She broke off, her cheeks burning. "I mean...Di is Mum's best friend. They're as good as sisters. Mum promised to take care of you."

"Until they came home. Not forever."

"She won't kick you out," Lou said firmly. "I won't let her."

At the other side of the bridge was the boat yard. Moored to one side were several boats with a 'For Hire' sign next to them. On the other side were the privately owned boats in a small marina owned by the same chap who owned the yard.

As Jim took in the sight, Lou recognized that seafarer's look in his eyes. He loved boats and for the last two years had had a summer job in the boat yard. He was hoping to join the navy. He'd taken the entrance exam and physical for naval college a couple of weeks before the earthquake and was waiting to hear. He'd done his A-levels a year early and was enjoying his gap year, working in the boat yard whenever they needed him.

He stared at the boats bobbing up and down on the water. "Shame we can't just live on a boat."

Staci walked up with Deefer and looked at him. "Why would we want to do that? We're staying with Nichola. But can we go and look at Dad's boat? I've put Deefer's lead back on so he won't run away and get in trouble."

"Sure. I told Matt that I'd say hi next time I was over this way." As Jim led the way, several people called out to him in greeting.

A big burly chap with a long black ponytail came over and slapped him on the back. "Hi, Jim. Sorry to hear about your parents. Is there any more news?"

"No. They called off the search."

"Oh, no. Oh, I'm sorry, mate."

"Thanks. Matt, this is my sister Staci, our friend, Lou, and her dog Deefer. This is Matt Woodhouse, the boss here."

Matt smiled. "Nice to meet you at last. Jim talks about you both all the time. I'm afraid I don't have any work this week if that's what you were after, mate."

"Not this time, but would you mind if we look over Dad's boat?"

"Of course not. I'll get the keys. See you over there." Matt headed back to the office.

"It has keys?" Lou raised an eyebrow. She followed Jim as he led them to the private docks.

Jim grinned and turned to look at her, rolling his eyes as only he could.

If only he knew how that affected her. Anyone else did it, and she'd deck them. Jim on the other hand...

"Of course she has keys," he said. "Otherwise anyone could just steal her."

"Her? And I suppose she has a name?"

"*Avon*," Jim replied. "She's a beauty." He led them over the gangplank onto the deck.

Matt joined them and looked at Staci. "Your brother told you the three rules to boating, right? One, keep the boat on the water. Two, keep the water out of the boat. Three, stay in the boat."

Lou giggled.

Matt glanced at her. "I'm perfectly serious. You wouldn't believe some of the idiots who hire the boats." He gave Jim the keys. "Just bring them back to the office when you're done."

"Sure. Thanks."

Lou followed Jim around the boat as he gave her a guided tour.

It was bigger than she thought.

"So, *Avon* is forty feet long with a fully enclosed bridge, unusual for a small boat," he began.

Small? She let Jim ramble on and followed him down a steep flight of steps from the bridge directly below to a reasonably big, serviceable galley, with stove, fridge-freezer, pull-up table, ample storage space and a window looking over the front of the boat.

Lou opened the cupboards and found cups, plates, pots, and pans. Drawers contained knives, forks, and spoons.

"That door on the left goes out onto deck. Down those steps are two double cabins and the head."

"Head?"

"It's what you call a bathroom on a boat." He grinned. "Don't you know anything?"

She poked her tongue out at him, following him down more steep stairs.

She peeked into one of the cabins. A round window let in the sunshine. There was a bed on each

wall with just enough room between them to walk. The cabins had separate entrances but also had a connecting door.

She burst out laughing at the fact the bathroom had a frosted window. "Who's gonna look in when you're at sea?"

Jim shook his head at her. "Not at sea now, though, are we? The shower runs off the five-gallon fresh water tank. This also supplies the sink in the galley. The cistern runs off the five-gallon grey water tank."

"I see." She dodged Deeper, who ran past her, settling on one of the bunks. "Guess that one's mine, then."

Back on the bridge, Jim explained all the instruments which included the two small engines, radio/transmitter, the compass, the anchor and a fish finder navigational screen. The running lights, mast light, and VHF antenna lights had to be on during the hours of darkness. Unusual for a cabin cruiser, she had a mast with two sails. The main sail was a one-hundred-fifty-foot genoa, with a one-hundred-ten foot headsail and storm jib as well.

A door on the right of the bridge led out onto a small platform from which there was a ladder down to the deck. The deck, which ran all around the boat, had been well cared for as had the bow pulpit, which shone in the sunlight.

Lou followed Staci back to the cabins and stretched on the made up bunks. "Lovely and comfy," Lou said. "There's even space underneath them." She put her hands under her head. "You know I wouldn't mind living on a boat. Maybe I should apply to join the navy, too."

"It's fun," Staci said. "We take the boat on holiday sometimes."

"Must be nice, being rocked to sleep by the sea."

Jim laughed from the doorway. "Comfy are we? Time we were going, it's nearly five. We don't want to keep Nichola waiting."

Lou stood and pulled Staci to her feet.

Together the three of them climbed to the galley and onto the deck.

~*~

Jim locked *Avon* up carefully, while an idea formed in his mind. He headed to the office to return the keys.

"Thank you for letting us on her, Matt."

"Anytime," he said and shook Jim's hand. "She's your boat now, I guess."

"Dad's not dead," Jim said sharply. "He and Mum are missing, that's all. I'll be by next week."

"See you then."

He headed outside to find the girls. "Come on, I'm starving."

"You're always starving," Lou told him. "Must be a man thing, because I never am."

"Will we live with you now, Lou? I don't want to be sent away to live with Aunt Edith," Staci said as they crossed the park. "She doesn't like me."

"Don't see why we would be. Mum and Dad will be back," Jim said.

"I know that, but if I can't stay here until they do, I will run away." Staci huffed.

Jim stopped. His sister's face was set and determined.

What if the social services became involved, what if they had no choice but to live with Aunt Edith or go into care? Once he was eighteen, in a few short months, he'd be thrown out. But they'd never let him care for Staci...besides, he'd be in the navy and who knows where.

"I'm not changing my mind. I will go where no one can find me."

"You can't live on your own," Jim told her. "You're not old enough."

"I can. I'll go live on the boat. *Avon* is a second home anyway."

"You're not old enough go on your own," he repeated.

"And if you think I'd let you go off without me, you have another think coming. We'll be the three musketeers, with Deeper being the fourth." Lou added and pulled Staci into a hug. She looked at Jim. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Jim said. "Right now, we'd better hurry home. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

Over dinner, Jim kept running through the same idea in his head, over and over. He had to do something. Could he search for his parents himself? If he did, where would he start? And what would happen to Staci if he did?

"Are you finished with that plate? It's not going to clean itself." Lou held out her hand.

"Are you feeling all right?" Jim asked, trying to lighten the mood. "It's not like you to volunteer for anything, never mind the dishes."

"I'm fine," Lou snapped. "Mum cooked, so I don't see why she should do the dishes."

"That's very kind," Nichola said. "It will be nice

not to have to do them."

"We'll help, Lou," Staci said.

"Even make the tea," Jim added.

"Anyone would think you lot were after something." Nichola laughed as she left the room.

Lou quickly cleared the table, shut the kitchen door and began to wash up. It didn't take long with Lou washing, Staci wiping, and Jim putting away and making a pot of tea.

He took a mug through to find Nichola engrossed in a TV game show. "We're going to play monopoly in the dining room," he said.

"Don't keep Staci up too late."

"We won't." Jim removed the game from the sideboard and took it through to the clean table. He set the board up and then called to the girls.

Staci carried her tea and another he assumed was his. Lou brought her tea and the biscuits. She pushed the door shut with her knee and sat down.

Jim picked up the dice. "I start."

"Why?" Staci crossed her arms and frowned.

"Because, kiddo, I'm the eldest and the only male in the room."

"Don't argue, Stace," Lou said. "Just remember that men only have two faults."

"Oh yeah? And what might they be?" Jim asked.

"Everything they say and everything they do." Lou grinned at him.

"At least it's only two. Not like women." Jim poked his tongue out at her. He rolled the dice. "Usual rules apply," he said moving his counter. That, of course, meant his own rules.

Lou was winning until she landed on his property with a hotel and four houses. Although the girls