

Echo-Foxtrot

Clare Revell

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Dedication

For Luke, Callum, Jack, and Matt. The best nephews an aunt could ask for.

Praise for

November-Charlie, *Book 1 of Signal Me*

“Three teens, a forty-foot boat, two oceans, and a mission: what could go wrong? Plenty! Clare Revell takes readers on an adventure of a lifetime as her young characters encounter one danger after another on their quest to rescue Mr. and Mrs. Kirk after authorities have given up the search.” ~ Kathleen Friesen

“The incredibly talented Clare Revell has cooked up another amazing treat in this fast-paced and enthralling adventure. I fell in love with Lou, Jim, and Staci from the very start. Ms. Revell has an incredible knack for writing strong suspense, and this YA story is no exception.” ~ Mary Manners

1

Jim Kirk leaned back in the seat of the USAF helicopter and glanced at his sister Staci, wanting to make sure she was all right. Sitting in the seat beside him, Ailsa Cudby slid her hand into his. He squeezed it tightly as he turned his gaze to the window. He didn't want either of the girls to see the tears in his eyes. He'd left his best friend Lou Benson behind, something he'd sworn he'd never do. She was like a sister to him, even if she didn't want to admit it.

They'd been through so much together the past few months. They were like the musketeers. All for one and one for all.

It should have been all of them who stayed, or none.

Below them he could see the vast swath of blue Pacific Ocean. Above them the huge rotor blades whirled and thudded. The helicopter banked a little to the left as it changed to a new course heading. He craned his neck but couldn't even see Agrihan as a tiny dot anymore. There was nothing below him but blue water.

"It'll be OK, Jim." Ailsa's quiet voice came over the headset he wore.

Jim shook his head. Things would never be OK again. He slowly reached up and turned on the microphone attached to his helmet. "How can it be

when we left Lou behind?" he asked.

He blinked hard. He'd never see her again.

He looked down again at the logbook on his lap. One of Lou's coded entries lay in front of him. She'd written it in mirror writing, so he couldn't read it—until an officer had lent him a mirror. He read it again.

I'm dying. Mafuso reckons there is nothing he can do. Not that he told me that. He insisted I was fine and healing nicely. I overheard the conversation with Amilek, and when I confronted him, he didn't deny it. The infection in my damaged leg is too deep. Fixing it is beyond his medical knowledge, and we'll never get rescued in time. I've always known I'd never recover from this. That's why I'm not leaving Agrihan. I'll go with the others to the base and then come back here to the village and spend my last few days on our island in the sun. It's for the best.

Jim, when you eventually read this, forgive me for the way I've been acting. I didn't want you to know, because I hate goodbyes. I love you, I always have. Ailsa is good for you. Be good to her. Tell Stace I love her too. Take care of her. And tell Mum...

Tell her I love her and I'm sorry.

Jim turned his face back to the window, his eyes stinging and his stomach tying itself in knots. This was his fault. He'd lost her, because of a stupid idea he'd had to pay her back for drawing sharks, dots, and other things all over the logbook. Because of him, she was dying, and he'd left her behind to die alone.

Lord, if I'd known, I'd never have left her. I shouldn't have done it. Forgive me...for I can't forgive myself for this.

One of the officers touched his arm. "I need you to talk to the doc flying out to the island. She needs to know about your friend's injury."

Guilt flooded him anew and he swallowed hard.

“OK.”

A new voice rang in his ear. “Hi, I’m Dr. Andrews. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Lou got attacked by a shark in September. I did what I could, but I’m no medic, and we didn’t have much on board the boat.”

“Did you call for help?”

The spear of guilt dug deeper. “No, we couldn’t. The radio was broken and the phone had gone overboard in an accident. We were too far from land, so...” He paused. That was a pretty feeble excuse. He should have done more. He *was* the adult, after all. Forcing his emotions down—after all, he was a man and men didn’t have emotions—he gave the doctor all the information he could, along with what plants Ailsa and the village doctor, Mafuso, had used.

“But her leg smells again,” he finished. “And according to what I’ve just read in the logbook, there was nothing more Mafuso could do. She’s dying.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Dr. Andrews said firmly. “I have the OR standing by and I’m taking a team with me. Colonel Fitzgerald is treating her now, and I’ll start working on her as soon as I arrive.”

“I don’t know her blood type or her allergies. Nichola, her mum, would be the best person to ask. I know she, Lou, gets a lot of migraines.”

“I’ve already spoken to Mrs. Benson.”

“Is she really there?” he asked. “And my parents?” It wasn’t that he doubted Colonel Fitzgerald’s word that they were alive—after all, the officer had no reason to lie to them—he just wanted to be sure before he allowed himself to hope.

“They sure are, and planning on meeting the chopper as soon as it lands.”

Jim closed his eyes as the doctor signed off and the headpiece went quiet. *Thank You, God, for keeping my parents safe. Let the medical team get to Lou in time. Let Colonel Fitzgerald persuade her to come back or have him bring her kicking and screaming, 'cause I can't lose her now. Not after all we've been through.*

Staci kicked him. "Hey, don't fall asleep. You're not allowed to fall asleep. We're going back to civilization and to find Mum and Dad."

He opened his eyes. "I'm not sleeping."

"And no checking your eyelids for holes either like Dad does on a Sunday afternoon. We all know what that means. It's like reading with your eyes shut."

"OK." Jim smiled slightly. Not even her enthusiasm would rub off on him at this point.

"You suppose Mum and Dad will be cross we left on our own?"

"They're bound to be. Ground us for at least fifty years, most likely."

Staci scrunched up her nose for an instant, then grinned. "Sounds good to me. I don't want to leave a nice, warm house with glass windows and a roof that doesn't leak for a long time. Just think, Jim. A house that has light switches. Hot water that comes from a tap and plenty of it. Bubble bath. Sheets. Blankets. Proper toilets that flush, with a lock on the door, and toilet paper. Meals I don't have to cook. Roast chicken, chips, and pizza. And chocolate. They can ground me as long as they want. Sounds like heaven to me."

"Nothing like heaven," Ailsa said. "And that's you sorted. Me, on the other hand?"

Jim shook his head. "She'll be bored within a week. And begging to be allowed out or to watch TV or something. Mum's idea of grounding us is no TV,

no internet, no phone, and no going out unless we're escorted by her." He looked at Ailsa. "And you're staying with me."

She smiled. "If your parents want me."

"I want you," he said. "Forget the fact you have nowhere else to go. Besides, we're both over eighteen, so we're adults now. We can do what we want. Well, within reason, as it has to be legal." He paused, running his fingers over the back of her hand. "And most important of all? I love you."

"Love you, too."

"Good. So don't give me any of this leaving-me rubbish. I want you to stay."

Staci rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, if you're going to get soppy and kiss her, then go find a room. Oh wait, you can't." She put her hands over her eyes. "Go on then. You got ten seconds before I look. Jim and Ailsa sitting in a chopper..."

Jim grinned and kissed Ailsa's cheek. "I mean it. I want you to stay with us."

She smiled. "I'd like that too. OK, Stace, you can look now."

Staci peeked between her fingers. "Are you sure? I'm way too young for that kind of thing."

Jim snorted. "Yeah, right. And what was the name of that boy band again?" He winked. "You know, the one in the poster in your room where you'd stand on tiptoes on the bed and kiss each of them good night..." He broke off laughing as she kicked him.

"Insult me all you want. I don't care." She grinned at him. "We're going home..."

2

Lou Benson stood motionless on the beach of Agrihan as the helicopter vanished into the cloudless blue sky. At least Jim, Staci, and Ailsa were safe. Something they hadn't been since they got shipwrecked here back in November, two months ago—although technically, they hadn't been safe since embarking on this trip back in June.

Her leg throbbed and she shivered.

She cast a sideways glance at the tall man with salt-and-pepper hair standing beside her in his green flight suit. "Are you still here? You should have gone with them, Jack."

"Why?" Her would-be rescuer, Colonel Jack Fitzgerald, United States Air Force, moved to stand in front of her, hands on hips, his piercing brown eyes boring into her.

She wished he'd just go away and let her die in peace. She was hot, cold, couldn't stop shaking, and knew from the smell that the infection in her leg was raging uncontrolled throughout her body. The fact the pain had been reduced to a dull ache was another sign the end was near.

She accepted her fate. Death was no more than she deserved. She'd go back up the cliff path to where she buried Deefer and lie down on the ground there with him and sleep. They'd left home together and now they'd stay together on Agrihan forever.

"Why should I have left you here alone?" Jack repeated.

"Because you should have. You're ruining everything by staying." She headed across the sand, leaning heavily on her homemade crutches. Her ankle twisted beneath her and she fell, crying out in pain.

"Ruining what?" Strong hands gripped her and picked her up, holding her firmly in his arms.

She struggled, blinking away the tears of pain. "Leave me alone."

"You know I can't do that. Now do I carry you or can I trust you not to run off again?"

"How can I run when I can't even walk?" She could hear herself biting his head off and she couldn't stop it.

"So let's go back to the base and wait for the chopper. They're sending out another one to pick us up."

"Why?"

"Because I was sent here to rescue you, so that's what I'm going to do. It's called following orders. Besides, I made a promise to your mom not to come home without you."

"Fine." Lou closed her eyes and let him carry her. For an instant she felt safe, but the feeling didn't last long.

Jack carried her back up the beach to the base. He laid her down on the runway. "Right. You stay here while I get this fire going again."

"Not going anywhere. You didn't bring my crutches, but it doesn't matter. Nice to sit down for a bit." Lou pushed herself upright, shifting back against one of the crates Jim had found. She shut her eyes, shivering as she wrapped her arms tightly around her

middle. She listened as Jack's running steps moved around the runway. Things had gotten so messed up, and she didn't know why.

Jim would say it was her lack of faith, but that was Jim.

She didn't need a God who let bad things happen to good people running her life for her. She was quite capable of running it herself. And if she then trashed it, well, then she had no one to blame but herself.

"Not sleeping, are you?" Jack's voice cut through her thoughts.

She forced open her eyes. "No, I'm not."

"Good. I don't want you to sleep yet." Jack draped the blanket he'd found around her shoulders.

"Why not?"

"It's not bedtime yet. When did you last eat or drink?"

Lou thought for a moment. "Yesterday morning-ish. But that was only water. I haven't had anything that isn't water for weeks. There is a distinct tea and coffee shortage here."

Jack sat beside her, pulling his knees up and resting his wrists on them. "You know, Lou, Nicky..." He paused. "Your mom says I'm like a bear with a sore head without at least three cups of coffee in the morning."

"Mum?" She tilted her head, confused. Mum's name was Nichola, not Nicky. Only Bill and Di called her Nicky. And anyway, she was thousands of miles away. "You know Mum?"

"Yeah, I do. You're pretty, just like she is."

"I'm not pretty," she retorted, pushing the blanket to the ground. "I'm ugly and crippled. And I have a tendency to kill those who get close to me. Or at least

hurt them badly. They'll be better off without me."

"I'm sure they don't think so."

Lou shivered. "They will do. It's my fault. All of it."

He wrapped the blanket around her again. "Why's that?"

Lou took a deep breath and looked away. "We went fishing because I drew sharks and stuff all over the logbook. And I saw that Jim was asleep when the autopilot was off. He'd only dozed off for a minute or so, but I could have called or shaken his arm to wake up, but I didn't and the boat sank..."

She shifted a little, trying to get her leg in a position where it didn't ache quite so much. "Deefer dying was my fault too. I knew I should stay on the path, but I saw something and I went to investigate. I was about to step forwards. Deefer rushed me and knocked me over. He ran straight into one of those wild-animal traps the natives use. The trap sprung upwards, the metal teeth dug into him. I couldn't get him out."

Lou held her hands out in front of her. "I had his blood on my hands. I killed him. If I had stayed on the path, he would still be alive. When I went fishing with Jim, we went to get fish 'cause Jim was tired of not having fresh food. He'd done nothing but mention sharks for days. Didn't matter where we were, he saw sharks. In the Atlantic, Caribbean, and so on. We thought it was an excuse to stop us swimming. I was splashing in the water to annoy Jim. I attracted it. Then I tried to save the catch. If I'd left it, then I could have swum faster."

Tears blurred her vision and her voice wavered. "I can't go home. I'm dying. Mafuso said so. The others

don't need to watch that. And it's not fair on Mum after I've been gone for so long."

Jack tossed more wood onto the fire. "Who's Mafuso?"

"We stayed in his village after the fire at Christmas. Think that was started by the volcano. Did you know it erupted? Got photos—it was pretty. Mafuso's a good guy. He's the village medic, trained by missionaries apparently. There was nothing he could do to halt the infection. Don't have long. Couple days maybe." She shrugged. "But it's OK. I can stay here with Deefer."

Jack put his hand over hers. "You'll be fine once we get you back to base."

She frowned. *Which part of dying didn't he understand?* "Go talk to Mafuso if you don't believe me. He's a week's walk in that direction." She pointed to the gate.

"Your mom loves you very much. She wants you back home."

She couldn't keep up with the way he kept changing the subject. "No, she doesn't."

"I know for a fact she does. After I met you in Cornwall, I contacted her. I saw you in the paper and realized you had run away."

"We didn't *run* away," she corrected. "Staci and I *stowed* away. It's different. We hid on the boat until Jim had left and it was too late for him to do anything about it."

"Stowed away or ran away, it's the same thing. But I never imagined you'd be silly enough to risk the Atlantic during the hurricane season."

Lou shrugged. "Didn't have a choice. They'd stopped looking for Bill and Di, so we went to look

instead.”

“When the wreckage of your boat was found, your mom was frantic. We’ve been looking for you for weeks. Your mom has been staying at my place since before Christmas.”

“Mum’s here?”

“She’s waiting at the base. As are Jim and Staci’s parents.”

Lou looked at him for the first time since she’d begun speaking. “They’re alive?”

“Yes, they are and all three of them are worried sick about you kids,” he said. “They love you and just want you home safely. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or think you’ve done. No one is beyond help, and that includes you.”

Lou shivered, tugging the blanket closer. Why was it so cold all of a sudden? “I told you, it’s too late. Can I go sit with Deefer now?”

“In a few minutes. You don’t look so good.”

“Don’t feel so good.” She lay down on the tarmac and closed her eyes. Maybe she’d sleep for a minute and then go up the path.

“I’m going to set up an IV,” he said. “Get some fluids into you.”

“OK,” she whispered. Nothing really mattered anymore.

Jack worked quickly and she barely felt the needle going into the back of her hand. “All done,” he said. “The chopper will be here in about twenty minutes. There’s a surgical team standing by at the base back home. They’ll fix your leg, and we’ll get you well again.”

“Not possible,” she murmured. “Just tell Mum I’m sorry and I love her.”

"You can tell her yourself, kid." He pushed her hair back from her face. His touch was strangely comforting. Like her father's had been a long time ago. "You'll see her in a little while."

"Can I sleep now?"

"Not yet. I'm not going anywhere, OK?"

She nodded. Least this way, she wasn't alone. Because, although she'd gotten used to the idea of dying, suddenly the whole concept scared her.

3

Anderson Air Force Base grew underneath them.

Jim's stomach twisted. He wanted to see his parents desperately, but at the same time he didn't. He knew he was going to be in trouble for leaving in the first place, never mind for not having enough faith in the authorities, and God, to look after his parents and care for them and find them. And then there was taking Staci with him and willingly putting her life in danger.

Ailsa squeezed his hand. "It'll be OK," she said. "They love you."

He turned in his seat to look at her. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I know you. It hasn't been long, but I know the way you think. Remember my parents were missionaries, too. For some reason they, like pastors, expect way more from their kids than any other parents seem to do." She smiled at him. "Yes, they'll be mad, but they love you."

Staci bounced in her seat. For the first time in months, he could see the thirteen-year-old that she once was, shining through again. "We're here. Look, Jim—cars, planes, proper buildings..."

Jim nodded. "Yeah."

The helicopter circled and landed. Five airmen ran over to it, along with a medical team and three civilians.

His parents, Bill and Di Kirk, and Lou's mum, Nichola Benson.

Staci screamed, jumping up and down in sheer joy. "Look, look, look!"

"Mum and Dad," Jim said. His heart leapt into his throat. "They're really here."

Staci leapt out as soon as the door opened, still screaming and crying. "Mummy! Daddy!" She hugged both her parents tightly.

Jim sat still for a moment longer and then jumped out of the chopper, straight into the arms of his parents. He hugged them tightly, tears filling his eyes and unashamedly running down his face. "I thought you were dead..."

"We thought the same of you two," Dad said, pulling Staci into the group hug. "Running away was an incredibly stupid and thoughtless thing to do. Why did you do it? Why not let the authorities do their job?"

"I'm sorry." Jim took a deep breath. "You were missing. No one was doing anything, so I thought I'd find you myself. Then the girls stowed away and..."

"Don't get mad at Jim or Lou," Staci interrupted. "I wasn't going to be left behind."

"We were worried sick," Mum told them, her voice wobbling. "When we finally found a working telephone, Nicky told us you were missing—"

His mother took a deep breath. "We've been frantic, wondering where you were. Jack kept in contact, told us he'd found you, but..." She paused. "I am so mad at you."

"Guess we're grounded," Jim said quietly.

"For the rest of your lives," Dad said. "And then some. You of all people should know better, James."

Jim shifted. "Sorry."

Dad nodded. "We'll discuss this later."

Jim turned and looked for Ailsa. She was standing on the edge of the group, looking awkward. He grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "This is Ailsa. She's a missionary kid, too," he said. "She saved our lives several times."

Mum smiled. "Nice to meet you, Ailsa."

Staci grinned. "He forgot to mention she's his girlfriend."

Jim elbowed her. "Shh."

Ailsa blushed as she shook their hands. "Jim has told me so much about you."

Mum smiled. "I'm looking forward to learning about you."

Jim looked at Nichola. "I'm sorry."

Nichola hugged them. "I thought I'd never see you again," she said. She looked past them. "Where's Lou? Didn't she come back with you?"

The blonde officer looked at her. "Jack stayed behind with her, Mrs. Benson. He said to tell you he'll be back on the next chopper."

Nichola looked at her and then back at Jim. "Why didn't she come?"

"She's sick and not thinking straight." He sucked in a deep breath. "Deefer died a couple of days ago and what with her leg being infected again and all..."

"Her leg?" Nichola frowned. "How did her leg get infected?"

"She got attacked by a shark and..." He broke off as Nichola paled.

Dad wrapped an arm around her to keep her from falling. "Shark?" he asked.

Jim felt sick. How could his dad always make him feel so guilty with so few words? "We went fishing in