



1

...an historical occasion, the first time an important scientific discovery like this has been broadcast live. The excitement here above ground is palpable; we can only guess how thrilling it is down at the entry point. The scientists and potholers are all at a safe distance, and the specially designed and constructed robotic systems are now ready to start dismantling the ancient cave-in. What we might find beyond, no one is certain, although a recent series of seismic surveys suggest that the hidden cave system, isolated for perhaps millions of years, is vast. Rumours abound that it might contain caverns larger than the recently discovered Son Doong Cave in Vietnam, and extensive systems as long as the legendary Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. I, for one, have never been so excited. This is a day that everyone connected with this expedition will remember for ever. And I hope you, the viewers, will remember it too.

Hidden Depths—Live!, **Discovery Channel, Thursday,**
17 November 2016

As I watched three black-clad figures adorned with climbing gear being lowered into a cave, Jude threw an apple core at my head. It just missed, hitting the wall behind me, splitting

and showering me with fruit flesh and pips.

“Piss off!” I shouted. His shadow flitted from my bedroom doorway—he was obviously wary of retribution—but his left hand and head reappeared around the jamb.

“I’ll tell Mum you swore,” he signed.

“So tell her!” I said. My words were a vibration formed from little more than memory. I felt the regular *plod-plod* of my younger brother’s footsteps as he stalked back into his own bedroom, and a moment later a thud against the wall as he jumped on his bed. He’d be back. Little turd was in that sort of mood.

Brushing moist apple from my shoulder, I turned to the television once more. I had only just turned it on. I’d been strumming my guitar for an hour or so, before succumbing to the urge to slouch down on my bed and watch some undemanding crap on TV. But the first image I’d seen had immediately caught my attention.

It wasn’t a jungle, exactly. More like a heavily wooded landscape, hillsides rich in trees and shrubs, more distant peaks bare and stark and swathed in mist. Creepers hung from trees that grew far above, feeling their way into the shadows like dormant tentacles, and a stream zigzagged slowly along the base of a ravine. Several large tents were pitched there, a few more smaller ones close by, and a storage compound was piled with plastic crates and khaki bags. There were people moving in the ravine, and it was their expressions that had made me watch so intently.

They were excited. Not just caught in the moment but properly thrilled by what they were doing, and whatever it was they’d found. The “Live” motif in the screen’s corner gave the scene even more immediacy. Men and women clustered around the camp in the background, and the camera was

focused on one small group—the three people draped in ropes and harnesses, the propped metal winch, and the dark gulf of the cave entrance set in the hillside. Two women worked the winch, and one by one the explorers were lowered out of the light and out of sight.

I was confused why there was no narration, but then I pressed a button on the remote and subtitles popped up. Jude must have been watching my TV again, messing up the settings. Annoying little shit.

“—just over a mile, so although that doesn’t yet make this anywhere near the longest or the deepest cave system in Europe, that unique feature does set it aside as the most fascinating, and the potential for deeper exploration is huge. As Dr Krasnov said earlier, you’re watching history in the making, live on the Discovery Channel. So as these three cavers are lowered into the vertical cave mouth, further inside the robotic systems are already...”

What unique feature? I wondered. The cave mouth looked unremarkable, a sinkhole perhaps fifteen feet across, its edges shrouded in bushes. Daylight seeped down one side, revealing a plant-covered wall that seemingly led straight down. It was a bit spooky, I supposed, and watching the last caver disappear into the darkness I wondered whether I’d stumbled onto a new drama or movie. But I checked that it really was the Discovery Channel, and then the presenter appeared in shot for the first time. I’d seen her before, reporting from all across the world. *What an amazing job*, I thought. At fourteen, I was just starting to get a feel of what I wanted to do, and watching this reporter filled me with anticipation. Being deaf wasn’t going to stop me from trying to become who I wanted to be.

“As we said earlier, there’s already a team of fifteen camped out at this system’s furthest extreme,” the presenter continued.

“They include experienced cavers, a botanist, a biologist, a geologist, and a palaeontologist, and they’ve been underground for almost six days taking samples and trying to catalogue the new species of plant and insects already discovered down there. But now that the entrance to the next passageway has been found, and the explorers are ready to start moving aside the rockfall that seems to hide a much deeper, vaster system beyond, it could be that this becomes one of the greatest scientific discoveries—”

I picked up my permanently open iPad and accessed the scrapbook app. I’d adapted and personalised it, and now used it whenever a news story grabbed my interest, attaching reports, video clips, and social media content. Sometimes I’d let my parents read my analyses. I knew they were pleased I wanted to be a journalist, but once Dad had said it would be hard work. He meant because of my accident, though he didn’t say it. But it was hardly surprising that communication was important to me. His doubt had surprised me a little, especially as he often listened to me playing music. Jude wanted to form a band with me, him as frontman, me as songwriter, musician, and everything else that didn’t involve stage-diving into the adoring audience. I’d replied to Dad, *Say that to Beethoven*. He never doubted me after that. Not to my face, at least.

I opened a new file, called it “New Worlds?” and was just about to start the introductory text when a movement caught my eye.

Jude slipped around the doorway again, crawling like a sniper, elastic band tensed between thumb and forefinger and paper pellet folded across it. I saw him and ducked, but he’d reacted faster. The pellet caught me an inch above my left eye.

I howled in pain, then roared in rage.

Jude tried to scamper away, wide-eyed and laughing.

I dropped the iPad on my bed and launched myself across the room, reaching for my annoying little brother. Years of ballet and athletics gave me the advantage, and I was across the room before he could find his feet.

My hands clamped around his ankles. He looked back over his shoulder. I grimaced, trying to put on the most evil expression I could muster. He annoyed the hell out of me, but sometimes I couldn't bear to wipe that manic, delighted grin from his face.

"And now, with vengeance close—" I began.

"No, Ally, I'm sorry!"

Something wet nudged against my side, nuzzling my hip where my tee shirt had ridden up.

"Otis!" I shouted, jumping. Jude took the opportunity to slither from my grasp and crawl away, crouching in his doorway ready to defend his turf.

The dog sat and nudged me again. "Coming!" I called, because I knew Mum had sent Otis to fetch me. He wasn't a proper hearing dog—not professionally trained, at least—but I'd spent long hours coaching the Weimaraner to let me know when people were calling for me, when the landline was ringing, and when someone was at the front door. Otis and I had a deep relationship, and it still amazed me how he seemed to differentiate between moods and tasks—serious was being my hearing dog. Play was pretty much everything else.

"Good boy!" I said, ruffling his neck and scratching his chest. Otis gave a short, sharp bark—I actually felt it, heavy in my chest—and pounded back down the stairs.

Jude and I fought down the staircase on our behinds, side by side. We laughed. I'd already forgotten about that far-away ravine, the hole in the ground, and the people disappearing into deep, deep darkness.