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Puntarenas, Costa Rica

Growing up in a beautiful, low-key place was paradise for some. The grander world had its problems, for sure. But at least there was something more to do than sweat. Though the one thing Charlee Flynn could agree with was that kids, specifically teenagers, had it much, much worse in big cities where that grand world could grab a hold of you and never let go.

Puntarenas wasn't all bad, but it wasn't what Charlee wanted. She pictured the bustling metropolises of the world and nearly gagged. She didn't want them, either. In truth, she had no idea what she wanted.

Being homeschooled had its advantages. Charlotte Valeria Flynn had graduated high school a year early, and for the last six months, the seventeen-year-old had struggled to make the next move. There were no career opportunities for her here in Puntarenas, nor in the Nicoya Peninsula, as a whole, not in the field she preferred, anyway. The only place she'd found remotely interesting was the National Museum of Costa Rica over in the country's capital of San José. The problem with that was that the museum would never hire someone like her. Charlee held no formal education, nor was she even an adult yet.

She was stuck in limbo, though, sometimes it felt more like purgatory.

They don't know what they're missing, she thought, stepping lightly.

When Charlee was frustrated, or just flat-out bored, she explored. It was another reason she didn't mind places like Puntarenas—Costa Rica as a whole really. The year-round tropical climate was perfect for someone who favored tank tops, shorts, and flip flops, like Charlee. But she also appreciated a good pair of hiking boots and heavy-duty cargo pants. Costa Rica was chiefly dominated by rainforests and severe elevation changes, including an 11,257-foot-tall, active volcano.

Today, she wore a bit of both ensembles. Her boots were a necessity, and her shorts gave her better range of motion to do what she loved more

than anything.

Charlee was a climber.

Ever since she was little, she'd climb anything and everything, much to the dismay of her father. He was overly cautious when it came to her safety. Charlee's mom was the complete opposite. She wanted Charlee to discover things on her own, pain being one of those things.

"Can't coddle 'em too much," she'd say. "Need to figure it out for themselves."

Charlee loved the way her mom thought, but she also appreciated her dad's concern for her. She knew it only meant that he cared deeply for her and worried about what could happen if she didn't think certain situations through.

"Like this one," Charlee muttered.

She looked down at the raging Pacific Ocean and pictured herself falling. The fall wasn't what concerned her—Charlee was also a phenomenal swimmer—but the waves slamming against the rocks had the potential to kill.

Out of all the spots she'd climbed, *El Peñon*, was her favorite. The coastal cliffs were a sight to see. Parts of them ended at a scenic beach filled with rolling waves. Other parts, Charlee's favorite parts, ended at nothing except the raging blue sea.

She had climbed El Peñon dozens of times and had only fallen once. That had been a rare occurrence, one stemming from forgetfulness. That day, Charlee had gotten into it with her parents over something trivial. And ever the fiery teen, she had stormed out of the house and gone for a walk.

Her walk had taken her to the cliffs of Puntarenas. It wasn't her fault they lived so close to El Peñon. The 1,500-foot trek was one she had enjoyed more times than she could count. Typically, whenever Charlee decided to go for a climb, she'd bring her gear bag. Inside was everything she'd need to safely traverse the cliffside. That day, she'd left the house in a hurry, leaving it behind in her bedroom closest.

Her first free climb had ended in disaster. She'd fallen and nearly drowned.

Her parents still didn't know.

Today, a year later, Charlee had also forgotten her gear bag, though, this time, it was out of sheer absentmindedness and nothing else.

But that didn't stop the half-Irish half-Cuban adventurer. Her lean muscles rippled beneath her permanently tanned skin as she held on for dear life. Her vibrant auburn hair billowed in the ocean breeze. Besides her love of everything history, her hair was the only gift her father's genetics had bestowed upon her. Other than that, she was exactly like her mother, down to her looks, physical build, and defiant attitude.

Charlee usually blamed her coarseness on her combined bloodline duking it out twenty-four-seven.

"Bugger," she said, unable to find a suitable foothold.

Charlee didn't speak with her mother's heavy accent, but she did enjoy the Aussie's more colorful verbiage. And though she was from Costa Rica, Charlee's tone did not contain the inflection of her birth nation. No, Charlie spoke with a *boring*, American accent that, honestly, confused a lot of people who had never met her before.

"Get used to it, ya drongo!" she'd reply.

When her dad would give her a look of disapproval, Charlee would grin and say, "Blame Mom."

"Okay, think, what's the next move?"

She readjusted her grip, transferring most of her weight to her legs. Her hands were heavily callused from a lifetime of climbing and adventuring, and she was in peak condition physically. Realistically, she could stay put all day if she had to.

But she couldn't. Her parents were due home any moment, and she was technically grounded, not that it had stopped her before. Charlee was supposed to be at home looking for online courses, not out here trying to kill herself.

She blamed her rebellious spirit on her mother. She had walked her

own walk from the time she was Charlee's age and she'd become incredibly successful. Her dad had too.

The path Charlee had chosen to take was one she was very familiar with, but one she'd never tried without gear. But it was too late now. There was no going back. She'd have to complete it on her own. Her biggest obstacle was her next one. There was a gap in the rockface, and she couldn't reach the other side without jumping. On any other day, her static line would catch her if she failed, but there was no static line today.

"No worries, Chuck." She looked down. "All you'll do is die." The waves were particularly rough today, thanks to a storm brewing further out.

Chuck was a nickname her father used for her. The joke was that her name was originally going to be Charles since, at the time, her parents had been preparing for a boy. A minor complication in her mom's pregnancy had forced a late-term ultrasound to be ordered, and it was then they had discovered that *Charles* was actually *Charlotte*.

Charlee didn't mind the nickname. However, her mother didn't like it.

"It's annoyingly American," she'd say.

Her dad would just shrug. "Well, so am I."

Charlee grinned. "And you chose to marry him, so…"

The memory made Charlee smile…then her foot slipped. "Whoa!" For a moment, she dangled forty feet above the water by nothing other than her strained fingertips.

She felt the rocks come free beneath her left hand.

"Aw, crap."

They crumbled—but Charlee didn't panic. Yes, she now hung by nothing except her right hand, *but* she was still in control. At least, she'd like to think she was. She waited for her body to stop swinging back and forth, then she clawed at the cliff and secured a second point of contact. Her right foot was a third point, and her left foot was the fourth.

She let out a long breath. "Nearly soiled myself right there." She laughed nervously. "You're good. You're good…"

But she still had to make the jump across the gap. She didn't wait for another piece of rock to break apart. Charlee spied a juicy handhold, dug her toes in, and leapt. She sailed across the four-foot-wide divide, keeping her eyes glued to the tantalizing ledge.

She grabbed it with both hands and squeezed. Then she immediately kicked at the wall with her feet until she found two competent footholds. When she was set in place, she smiled, feeling her skin breakout in goosebumps. Her adrenaline was firing on all cylinders right now. But then she noticed something.

The face of her watch came into view.

"Bugger."

She looked up and got moving. At this point, her parents might beat her home.