

Safe Passage

By Meryl McQueen

Chapter One Getting There

Jack's coughing kept her awake. From the first day of rediscovered laughter, to imagined echoes in an empty bed, Jack's coughing kept her dead awake.

'Bel, come on, we're going to be late!' Her dad knocked on the door and shouted as he moved next door to Jack's room, heavy boots shaking the floor.

Bel opened her eyes. If the sun was shining, it must be crack of dawn. That was her dad's specialty, crack of dawn starts to the day. Ever since she could remember, this was always the worst possible beginning to family vacations. No human should be that

cheerful that early. It was against every law of nature. Rolling over with a hand across her eyes, Bel tried to focus on getting through this first horrendous hour.

‘Belinda Anne, you heard your father. Up, up, up!’ If humanly possible, her mother was even more hyper this morning than usual. Which was damn hyper. God, why couldn’t someone else in her family have a bad morning once in awhile? They were already lame enough to make her think she was adopted half the time. Or wish she was, when it was so damn obvious that she shared at least some of their genes. But there they went again, one big plastic smiley face on top of another, all Mr. Rogers happy land. God, it was disgusting.

For what? A family vacation. No, her mom would argue with that. It was some hopeless excuse for a family vacation, when really her mother was dragging them all to some no-man’s-land island so she could do ‘archeological research.’ She’d been working on her Ph.D. for at least five years now, and this was supposed to be the summer of final ‘data collection’ for the dissertation.

Bel was sick of all the ‘study this’ and ‘study that.’ Great. Why couldn’t they at least go on some normal family trip, like a week at the beach or to New Orleans or something? Better yet, why couldn’t her mother go by herself, instead of forcing the entire family along for this lameass ride?

Which she wouldn’t even be going on, if Jenna hadn’t got mono from kissing Brandon behind the gym in the last week of school. Belinda gagged at the thought. Brandon Curtis, one time hottie, all sweaty from lacrosse practice and dripping B.O. Brandon Curtis, who barely even noticed Jenna until fifteen minutes before school was over for the year, and then wanted to stick his tongue down her throat. Nasty.

What kind of a best friend was Jenna anyway, kissing some stupid boy and falling flat on her face with a totally passé disease?

Before the mono, Bel and Jenna had planned the most awesome summer. Three summers in a row, since she was twelve, Bel begged her parents. And this year, two weeks before the end of school, they saw the light. Bel smiled in her semi-sleep, thinking about that victory.

‘Okay. Mom, Dad, I know we’ve talked about this before. And you kept saying when I got older I’d be able to go on vacation with Jenna and her parents. This year would be perfect. They’re going to North Carolina, camping for two weeks, and horseback riding on the Outer Banks.’

Bel’s Dad, Mr. Practical, was right away with the questions. ‘But aren’t there already going to be four of them in the car? I don’t see how there’d be room in the station wagon for five of you, plus that scraggly dog. Not to mention everything they’d need for that kind of a trip.’

His fifteen-year-old daughter was way ahead of him. ‘Dad, it’s cool—Matt’s staying on campus this summer, so I’d just be filling in for him, space wise. Plus, give me a break—Rugrat? He’s the sweetest cocker spaniel on the planet. He can sleep on my lap.’

Bel’s mom had a few other issues, but in the end they’d worked it all out. They were going to let her go, and Jenna was psyched. ‘Bel, that is amazing! They said yes?’

Slotting back to reality, Bel rolled out of bed. Yeah, Jenna, she thought. They said yes, and then you went slobbering all over skanky Brandon Curtis, and now you’re in bed for a month. Which left Bel cocking one resentful eye at her digital alarm clock as it

clicked over to five-thirty a.m., scrounging around for a clean t-shirt under her unmade bed, and plain pissed off.

Pulling on a pair of faded jeans, Bel squinted at the mirror. Hmph. Maybe she should just shear off her black, spring-loaded curls again, because this was taking way too long to grow out. And look, just for a change, zits on her chin and circles under her eyes. Not to mention that those jeans used to be loose. Crappy skin, bad hair, fat. And a month of family in the wilderness. Life sucked.

Jack, twelve, jumped from halfway up the stairs and landed in the kitchen. ‘Ouch! That killed my leg—Mom, check out this huge bruise on the back of my knee.’

Their mother mussed his hair and inspected his injury. ‘Oh, my poor baby! That looks like it really hurts, Jack. What did you do to yourself?’

Tearing open a bag of chips and stuffing them in his mouth, Jack shrugged. ‘Dunno. Soccer practice, maybe. But who cares? No school for the entire summer and we are going on vacation to a desert island. With giant spiders, and snakes, and...’

‘Jack, take your feet off the table. There will not be snakes. We’re going on an archeological tour, and I’m sure there will be plenty of interesting things to see.’

Jack slammed his sneakers against the white lino floor and pulled a face. Bel still hoped that her dad was right, and that someday Jack’s face would freeze like that. No luck this time, though. He stuck his tongue out at his big sister, and looked at their mother making waffles on the stove.

‘Aw, Mom, it’s the jungle. Don’t you know anything? I looked it up in my Crawly Creatures book, and there will definitely be spiders. Do you know that there are jumping spiders in Central America that can fly about eight feet through the air?’

He nodded with a rubber neck: fast, focused. ‘That’s like, if you’re standing here’—he pointed to the refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen—‘and I’m a spider hanging a web over here’—he hopped on the window sill in the breakfast area—‘then I could just take one flying leap and wham! you’re toast. The End.’

Jack’s mother wasn’t impressed. ‘Jack, eat your breakfast. We can discuss spiders in the car on the way to the airport. And Bel, honey, that t-shirt is filthy. Please go change—and when you’re done grab your bag and give it to your father in the garage. He’s packing the van.’

Bel slid slowly off the stool, dragging her fingers along the counter and chewing the last bite of her bagel. Blah, blah, blah. Instead of two weeks camping with her best friend and the coolest parents ever, it was permanent exile to an island with her dork of a little brother and her dweeb archeology freak parents. Great.

As promised, her dad was in the garage. Their minivan, a forest green dinosaur, looked like it was trying to give birth to mismatched luggage. Bel groaned and let her hair fall in her face. She bent down to tie her shoelaces, and tried to postpone—forever—the inevitable over-friendly beast that was her father on day one of their latest ‘family adventure.’ Bel gave in, pulling her duffel into the garage and setting it down in front of the sliding door to the car.

‘Thanks Bel, that’s great! I’m sure we’ll be able to find a place for this—and if not, well hey, you don’t need it right? You probably packed every shoe in your closet, didn’t you, Bel?’

He thought he was cute. He so wasn’t, but there was no point in trying to argue with the man. He was obsessed with his own stuff, and Bel decided to deal with it as best

she could. Under the circumstances. Which sucked. ‘Yeah, Dad, whatever. What is all this stuff, anyway?’

Every year, their dad relocated half their worldly possessions to some remote corner of nowhere, in search of the perfect picture. Not that he made any money from his photography, or anything—he was an accountant. But he liked to think that he was an artist, and the price the family paid for that was four extra hardtop suitcases of lenses, film, tripods, and whatever other gadget he happened to dream up that year.

Bel looked through the car window. Oh, yeah. Computer stuff. Only half hip with digital revolution, he’d bought a scanner, a new laptop, and a micro printer. Had to have the hard film, though, to develop himself in the dark with chemicals that stained his hands and smelled like cat pee. Ugh. That meant about a thousand miles of cable stashed in every corner of everyone’s luggage, and another coil of plastic in his hand.

‘Bel, I don’t suppose you have space for one tiny adapter—I need this to connect my camera directly to the printer.’

‘No way, Dad. You’re not putting that dirty thing anywhere near my new bathing suit.’

Bel wedged her bag onto the floor of the backseat and cracked her gum. ‘Besides, what do you need all this stuff for? All we’re doing is going to some stupid resort on some lame island to look at ruined buildings and old stones. Boring.’

Her dad gave Bel a warning cocked eyebrow and shoed her back inside. ‘Go tell your mother we’re ready. Jack, let’s hit the road, buddy!’

Jack bounced into the garage and piled into the car with a sigh. ‘Man, I am so tired. Maybe I need some more breakfast—Mom, can you bring the Doritos in the car?’

His mother turned on the house alarm, slid into the passenger seat and clicked shut her car door. ‘Jack, corn chips are not breakfast. Here, have a banana.’

Reaching into the cooler at her feet, she pulled out a plastic bag full of fruit. ‘Bel, do you want something, honey?’

Bel stared at the neighborhood as it blurred by. First choice, summer camping. Second choice, summer at home, with all the possibilities of hot nights and late parties. Third choice, by far last choice, on vacation with her parents and her dork of a brother. All the ingredients of eternal suffering, right here, right now. ‘No, thanks. Not hungry.’

The rest of the family set to consuming the contents of an entire cooler. Apples, bananas, muffins, yogurt, and cartons of chocolate milk disappeared into ravenous stomachs as her dad climbed onto the interstate. National Public Radio blared catastrophe from the speakers, and three-quarters of the Larsen family counted the miles to their destination.

Bob Larsen drove his family through the wakening light. He navigated through tree-cupped blocks of colorful ranch houses, driveways pocked with bicycles and skateboards, and shades pulled tight in dark windows. The engine yawned into gear. He retraced his steps for the thousandth time down the roads that led away from home.

This was his favorite part of the day, and he usually didn’t like to share it. Most mornings, he was up with the sun—a frosted glass of iced tea with mint and lemon in hand in the summer, a double rich mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows and cardamom in the winter.

Depending on the season, he sat on the deck or at the fireplace in the study; for the first hour or two of every morning before the world crossed into consciousness, the husband/father/accountant from Minnesota planned his travels around the world.

They covered the four-hour trip to the Twin Cities by the time the rest of the world was waking up. Bel was sure her father planned it that way—something about ‘early birds’ and ‘beating the traffic.’ More like an excuse for his nerdy self, distracted by the promise of ancient cities of dust and bones. Her parents parked the car in the long-term lot, tossed the remnants of their breakfast-on-the-go in the garbage, and hauled twelve bulky pieces of luggage out of the van.

They checked in. Early, as always. Bel folded herself into a chair and flipped on her headphones after replacing the batteries. She’d packed at least three extra sets. Please—desert island, with your family? Bogus. Desert island, with your family, and your mp3 player out of whack? Disaster. Staring at the crowds of people swimming in cross currents through the terminal, she set her jaw and resigned herself to having the worst summer of her life.

That’s just like her, Josh thought. Dumb Belinda, ruining it for everyone else. Again. Why didn’t she laugh anymore? She was always locked in her room, on the phone with her boring friends. Josh remembered family vacations when they were little, clearly signposted adventures that his dad held in the palm of his well-organized, itinerary-clutching hand.

Bel didn’t seem to mind being around him then—like the time they went trekking in Nepal, and rode elephants in the jungle. She’d been fun, and had fun. Bel had even

laughed when she fell in the mud; they'd collected frogs from the lake where they camped, and scared Mom speechless when she found one croaking under her pillow.

Forget any of that now. Bel was too up herself to talk to him, except to yell at him to go away. Scuffing his feet on the dirty white floor, Josh mumbled to himself. 'We'd have been better off without her and her freakazoid non-talking self.'

Enough about his stupid big sister. He was hungry, and his headache was getting worse. 'Mom, I'm starving! Can I go get something to eat now, please?'

His mom reached into her purse and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. 'Sure honey. Keep a lookout for something nutritious, okay? There's a deli counter,'—she pointed across to the next gate—'why don't you grab a turkey sandwich or something?'

Stretching, Bob Larsen stood up and turned to his son. 'Jack, I'm hungry, too. Let's go rustle up some snacks, whaddy say?' He reached over to tousle Jack's hair, but his son jerked away and screwed up his eyes.

'Dad, I told you not to do that when I have a headache. It really hurts, so don't!'

'Sorry son. I'm sure Mom's got Tylenol if you need it.'

Jack shook his head and started to walk away. 'What I need is some food. Right. Now. Before I die.'

Watching them stride away together, Talia Larsen danced a smile from her hazel eyes and nodded to herself. My boys, she thought. Rummaging in her hand luggage, Talia secured an unruly sprig of hair with another bobby pin. Bel used to call her a human pincushion. Lately, though, her daughter barely spoke at all. And Jack, her baby, was getting so big. It seemed like only yesterday he'd learned to walk—now he led his father to the counter, shoulders square against the world.

They returned with armloads. Sandwiches, sodas, candy bars, and a bag of Twizzlers. Non-food items too, including a souvenir key chain in the shape of a thermometer, Rollaids for Bob's inevitable travel heartburn, and three newspapers. Bel sneered at them. 'You guys are absolutely vile. You've been eating since five o'clock this morning, and now you've bought all that stuff? I bet you won't even finish it—you'll just throw half of it away. People are starving, you know. God, this is already the worst trip ever and it's barely even started. I am going to totally die.'

Her mother snapped. 'Belinda Anne, quit it. I have had enough of this, and I don't want to hear another word out of you. If you can't say anything positive, then keep it to yourself. We'd all appreciate it.'

Her voice rose and rumbled. 'Just give it a rest, alright? You have made it perfectly clear that the last thing you want is to be part of this family trip; to be blunt, your father and I are tired of hearing you whine about it. We plan on having a great time—well, your father, Jack, and I plan on having a great time—and whether you want to be here or not, you no longer have a choice in the matter.'

Taking a breath without leaving space for retort, her mother continued softly. 'We are not going to allow your negativity to spoil it for the rest of us. Now you either trash that attitude, young lady, or we are going to have to consider some serious grounding options when we do get home after this vacation. Got it?'

'Fine.'

'Fine? Is that all you have to say for yourself, or is there an apology lurking in there somewhere? Really, Belinda, we expect more from you. You're not a three-year-old, for goodness' sake.'

Bel slammed her mp3 player on the arm of the chair and slid her headphones back into place. ‘Whatever. Excuse me for living, then, if you want an apology. I said fine. Are you deaf now too, as well as blind to how stupid this whole thing is, making me come with you to the middle of nowhere?’

Good one, Bel, thought Josh. Peeve the parental units beyond their limits, and then what? Then they’d just stay mad at her for the entire time, the vacation would be one long argument, and he’d have to be the good kid. As usual.

Why couldn’t she just shut up for once? How hard could it be, and was that really too much to ask? Whatever. If you were fifteen and you thought you owned the planet, with everyone on it slaves to your every whim, it was probably impossible to keep your mouth clamped for more than three seconds in a row. Especially when your main goal in life was to be as unpleasant and unpredictable as possible, creating chaos for everyone who came within a mile of your miserable self.

Josh chomped through half his sandwich, wished for Doritos with bean dip and cheese sauce, and tried to stretch his headache out. It wasn’t getting any better. Unwrapping a second Twix, Josh concentrated on the food and tried to block out the continuing family fight.

Bob Larsen looked at his wife and daughter. So alike. The last time he’d tried to say it to Bel, she’d pounced, accusing him of being an idiot and declaring that she was absolutely nothing like her mother. Sure, sweetheart. Not only did they look alike—oil slick black curly hair; wide-set eyes; olive-tone, round faces; long torsos and short legs—but when they wanted a fight, they made sure they got a fight.

And when it was with each other, it could quickly turn to all-out war. This summer, a few plates and glasses had fallen victim to their rage, smashed against the floor when their frustration with each other peaked. He stepped in.

‘Bel, let’s take a breather, okay? They’ll be calling our plane to board any minute. Why don’t you go pick up a magazine or something to read on the flight?’

Bel wasn’t ready to let it go. ‘Great, Dad, take her side. I don’t understand why I can’t even say anything to...’

Her dad persisted gently, settling in the seat between his wife and daughter and patting money into Bel’s hand. ‘I know you’re upset, hon. But it’s time to make the best of it, and sparring with your mother isn’t going to change the situation.’

The plane was full of tourists heading south. Jack claimed the window seat, and Bel sat next to him. ‘You better not take off your sneakers, Jack, because your feet stink. Stay on your side, okay? And if my eyes are closed, genius, I’m asleep. Or trying to be. So do not wake me up to look out the window at some lame mountain or river or anything. Don’t care. Got it? Do. Not. Care.’

Jack wished he’d sat next to his dad. Bel was such a loser—didn’t she get how cool it was to watch the runway slide beneath them, and the people, cars, houses, cities vanish as the plane rose? He could watch that stuff all day. And the route had all kinds of great stuff to check out—just because they were thirty-three thousand feet in the air didn’t mean there weren’t tons of things to explore.

No chance of thunderstorms on the trip to Mexico, which was a bummer. Jack had seen lightning rip through the air on a flight to Texas once, and he’d spent a month sure

he'd be a storm chaser when he grew up. He'd checked the Weather Channel before they left for this trip. No luck.

Sure, the first hour scenery was kind of boring—the Midwest, flat and green, sprinkled with lakes. But their arc took them over the deserts of the Southwest, and those rock things rose from the earth.

Turning his head slowly to calm the ache at his temples, Jack swiveled in his seat. 'Mom, what are those cliff/rock things called that look like Legos glued on the desert? We learned it in social studies this year but I forget what they're called.'

His mother craned her head forward to look out of the window as Jack pointed. 'Yes, I see which ones you mean, Jack. Those have two names—mesa and butte. They are created when the rest of the earth around them erodes through wind and water over millions of years. In this area, they...'

Jack nodded his head and held up a hand. 'I get it, I get it, Mom. Thanks. Don't worry—there'll be plenty of time for long lectures on the ruins on this vacation. I promise I'll listen to you then, okay?' He grinned and focused his attention on the buttons in his armrest.

They changed planes in Tucson for Mexico City, and then boarded a six-seater for the trip over the mountains and to the island off the coast. They were the only ones on the flight. With every hour that passed, Bel sank further into her seat, and Jack fidgeted to see more of the ocean below.

The island leaned into view. 'Mom, Dad, there it is! That must be Isla Cara, right? It's so small, where are we going to land?' Jack loosened his seatbelt and pasted his hands on the plastic window, shielding his eyes from the internal lights.

‘Jack, honey, sit down. We’ll be landing in a few minutes—yeah, that’s where we’ll be spending the next month. Look closely; you might be able to see the remains of one of the temples. It sits right up against the airstrip.’ His dad smiled and settled back in his seat.

Bel sighed out loud and ran her fingers through her hair. Well, they were almost there. At least she’d be able to use her cell phone once they got on the ground. Jenna was going to hear all about the summer nightmare. And with her friend stuck in bed, they’d have plenty of time to talk.

Isla Cara was about twelve miles long and four miles wide. Covered in dense rainforest, it was subject to lashing tropical storms and unpredictable tides. What passed for beaches were stony outcrops of exposed seabed; at its highest point, the island was six hundred feet above sea level. More than anything, Isla Cara looked like an upside-down green teacup, bulging from a flat top to drop steeply to the sea.

Only thirty miles off the coast, the island had remained off the maps until the Second World War, when a ship had ‘rediscovered’ it and put it on the charts. Isla Cara only had one permanent settlement, consisting of an ecolodge on the south slope, and a village near the airstrip with a hundred permanent residents.

Catering for up to ten guests at a time, the single log cabin clung to the hill on stilts. It had solar powered hot water, passive solar heating with a curved roof, skylights, and a large central hall with the kitchen and dining room. The main attraction of Isla Cara was the archeology—ruins estimated to be more than twelve hundred years old, and shards of pottery and other artifacts scattered across the island.

Alario, their pilot, driver, and host, explained all this as the Jeep bounced around the rough track from the airstrip. ‘The lodge was built originally for a scientific expedition of seismologists from the mainland. They were studying the geology of the island, because it is linked to how some of the volcanoes around Mexico behave. Strange, do you not think also, to come across the ocean to study earthquakes to save people from volcanoes hundreds of miles away? But that is our island—so far from everything, yet so near at the same time, no? You have come a long way from...Minnesota. I hope you find yourselves at home on our small island.’

His voice sang. ‘So you see, this tiny place has many interesting things to explore. Some people say that they have even seen phantoms of those ancient peoples who lived here so long ago.’

Lifting a heavy, pounding head from his arms in the back seat, Jack surfaced. ‘Really, Alario? Like what, human sacrifices or bloody battles? Stuff like that?’

Alario drive by instinct, whipping the steering wheel from left to right to miss the biggest potholes while he cocked his head over his shoulder to answer Jack. ‘Who can say, my young friend? Who can say?’ He winked, pulled his hat further over his eyes and turned his attention to the road. The path narrowed, squeezing into a half-lane with deep ruts on the edges. Leafy, wet vines from the forest scratched the canvass roof of the Jeep as Alario forced through the green.

Bel screeched. ‘What was that? Oh my God, something dropped on the car!’

Alario winked and chuckled. ‘No, Miss Belinda, it was nothing. Just a few rainforest snakes saying hello. You will get used to it in no time.’

‘Mom...’

Bel’s mother shushed her. ‘Bel honey, he’s kidding. Take it easy, okay? No snakes, at least not in the lodge. Alario, you’ll have to excuse our daughter. She’s not exactly thrilled to be on vacation with her family this summer.’ Bel glared and blinked back furious tears. Jack asked for another aspirin, and pressed Alario for more details on the island wildlife. They’d arrived.