

There was a loud, gurgling groan. Somebody shouted, “Oh my gosh! Miss Delaware just died!”

“— for gettin’ some of us here safe,” Taylor continued. “And we pray that, as we are fine, upstandin’, law-abidin’ girls who represent the best of the best, you will protect us from harm and keep us safe until we are rescued and can tell our story to *People* magazine. Amen.”

“Amen,” the girls echoed, then fell into noisy chatter. Where were they? What would happen to them? Would they be rescued? Where were the adults? Was this something to do with the war?

“Teen Dream Misses!” Taylor singsonged above the din, smiling. “My stars. It’s gettin’ kinda noisy. Now. My daddy is a general, and I know what he’d say if he were here: We need to do a recon mission, see if there are any more survivors, and tend to the wounded.”

“My head kinda hurts,” Miss New Mexico said. Several of the girls gasped. Half of an airline serving tray was lodged in her forehead, forming a small blue canopy over her eyes.

“What is it?” Miss New Mexico checked to make sure her bra straps weren’t showing.

“N-nothing.” Miss Ohio managed an awkward smile.

“First things first,” Taylor said. “Any of y’all have first-aid training?”

Miss Alabama’s hand shot up at the same time as Miss Mississippi’s. They were both artificially tanned and bleach-blond, with the same expertly layered long hair. If not for the ragged state sashes they still wore, it would be hard to tell them apart.

“Names?” Taylor prompted.

“I’m Tiara with an *A*,” said Miss Mississippi.

“I’m Brittani with an *I*,” said Miss Alabama. “I got my Scouting Badge in First Aid.”

“Ohmigosh, me, too!” Tiara threw her arms around Brittani. “You’re so nice. If it’s not me, I hope you win.”

“No, I hope YOU win!”

“Ladies, this part is not a competition,” Taylor said. “Okay. Miss

Alabama and Miss Mississippi are on first-aid duty. Anybody have a phone that survived?"

Two of the girls brought forward phones. One was water damaged. The other could not get a signal.

Adina spoke up. "Maybe we should have a roll call, see who's here and who's missing."

Missing settled over the girls like a sudden coat of snow shaken loose from an awning, and they moved forward on autopilot, dazed smiles in place, and stated their names and representative states. Occasionally, one would divulge that she was an honors student or a cheerleader or a volunteer at a soup kitchen, as if, in this moment of collective horror, they could not divorce themselves from who they had been before, when such information was required, when it got them from one pageant to the next, all the way to the big one. Of the fifty states, only twelve girl representatives were accounted for, including Miss California, Shanti Singh; Miss Michigan, Jennifer Huberman; and Miss Rhode Island, Petra West, who, ironically, was the biggest girl in the pageant at nearly six feet. Some girls argued over whether the death of Miss Massachusetts — favored by bookies to win the whole thing — meant that the competition would never feel entirely fair.

"Thank you, ladies. I'm guessing that's where the rest of the plane is." Taylor pointed to the thick black smoke spiraling up from the jungle. "There might be more of us in there. We need to organize a search party. A Miss Teen Dream Recon Machine. Any volunteers?"

As a unit, the girls turned to gaze at the forbidding expanse of jungle. No one raised her hand. Taylor clicked her tongue. "Well, I guess there aren't any Ladybird Hopes⁴ in this crowd. My stars, I'm glad she's

⁴Ladybird Hope, the most famous Miss Teen Dream who ever lived, making her name as a bikini-clad meteorologist, small-town talk show host, lobbyist, mayor, and Corporation businesswoman with her own clothing line. Rumored to be running for president.

not here to see this. I bet she'd vomit in her mouth with disappointment. And then, like a pro, she'd swallow it down and keep smiling."

Taylor took a pink gloss from a hidden pocket and slicked the glittery wand over her lips. "You remember that The Corporation almost canceled the Miss Teen Dream Pageant last year due to low ratings, and they were gonna replace it with that show about Amish girls who share a house with strippers, *Girls Gone Rumspringa*? And then, just like a shining angel, Ladybird Hope stepped in and said she would personally secure the advertisers for the pageant. I have lived my whole life according to Ladybird and her platform — Being Perfect in Every Way — and I'm not about to let her down now. If I have to, I will go into that jungle by myself. I'll bet those Corporation camera crews will be real happy to see me."

"I'll go!" Shanti's hand shot up.

"Me, too!" Petra yelled.

Mary Lou nudged Adina. "I guess it wouldn't be very congenial of me not to go. Will you come, too? I want to have one friend."

Adina didn't know what they'd find in the jungle, but journalists always went where the story was, and Adina was the best journalist at New Castle High School. It was what had gotten her into this mess. She raised her hand to volunteer.

Two teams were organized and, after much debate, names were chosen: The Sparkle Ponies would stay on the beach, tend to the wounded, and try to salvage whatever they could from the wreckage. The Lost Girls would soldier into the jungle in the hopes of finding survivors.

Shanti gave instructions to the girls heading into the surf toward the mangled half plane, which was taking on water quickly. "We need to remember to bring out anything we can — first-aid kits, blankets, pillows, seat cushions, clothes, and especially food and water."

"But why?" Tiarra asked. "They'll be coming to rescue us real soon."

"We don't know how long that will be. We've got to survive till then."

“Ohmigosh. No food at all.” Tiara sank down on the sand as if the full weight of their predicament had finally hit her. She blinked back tears. And then that megawatt smile that belonged on cereal boxes across the nation reappeared. “I am going to be so superskinny by pageant time!”

CHAPTER TWO

The Lost Girls set off down the beach. Taylor led the way. Adina, Shanti, Petra, Mary Lou, and Tiara followed. Above them, the sun was a jaundiced eye. To the right, the vast turquoise ocean bit at the shoreline, gobbling small mouthfuls of sand. The sand itself, white as desert-bleached animal bones, stretched for miles, in one direction yielding to jungle growth and, farther on, green mountains and lava-formed cliffs, which created an almost turretlike wall running the length of the island. Just behind those cliffs a volcano rose, vanishing into heavy cloud cover. Its rumble could be heard on the beach, like a giant groaning in its sleep.

Shanti pointed to the volcano. "I hope that's not active," she said in a slightly British Indian-inflected voice.

The girls walked in the direction of the smoke and possible survivors, chaperones or handlers who might take charge and make everything better. They trekked through the inhospitable growth, breathing in gelatin-thick humidity mixed with soot and smoke. The jungle sounds were what they noticed first: Thick. Percussive. A thrumming heartbeat of danger wrapped in a muscular green. Sweat beaded across their upper lips and matted their sashes to their bodies. A bird shrieked from a nearby tree, making all the girls except Taylor jump.

"The smoke's coming from over there, Miss Teen Dreamers," Taylor said. She veered to the right, and the girls followed.

The jungle gave way to a small clearing.

"Holy moly . . ." Mary Lou said.