

# UNCHARTED PASSAGE

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Khao Lak Beach, Thailand*  
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Salt water burned her skin raw and churned around her feet as she clung precariously to the branch. The noise was deafening. She rested her cheek against the rough bark and closed her eyes, too exhausted to move any higher, at least for the moment.

She tried to gather her senses. The last sane thing she remembered was lying on fine white sand with a cold drink in one hand and a hot woman in the other. It was her third day on Khao Lak Beach, a pristine paradise on the southwestern coast of Thailand, and she was looking forward to another afternoon of casual flirting leading to a warm, tropical night tangled in the sheets, definitely not alone.

Finding herself clinging to a tree was not what she'd had in mind.

There had been no warning. First came the rumble, a crescendo of sound growing louder and louder until the softly cresting waves along the shore receded and an ear-splitting roar announced a thirty-foot wall of water bearing down on her. Before she could move, she was swept off her feet and carried inland along with everything that stood in the water's path. Beach

chairs, umbrellas, uprooted trees, and entire buildings rushed past like twigs bobbing in runoff from a hard rain in a street gutter.

But this vast tide of destruction engulfed more than sticks and leaves and the occasional unlucky bug. Dogs and cats panicked in the brown murky water. Farm animals landed on the roofs of buildings. However, it was the people Hayden would never forget. The bodies of the already dead as they floated by, and the desperation on the faces of those fighting for their lives. And the children. They had absolutely no hope against the surge of millions of gallons of water thrust upon the beach by the tsunami that rolled across the Indian Ocean. Those bodies, those faces, would forever haunt her dreams.

Nothing had prepared Hayden Caldwell for this. A graduate of West Point and several Army survival training schools, she was seldom overwhelmed, but she'd never had to fight the unstoppable power of nature. Liquid dripped into her left eye and Hayden was surprised when she touched the area and found her fingers covered in bright red blood. It was only then that she noticed the throbbing above her left eye. Gingerly, she explored a gash that was about an inch long and ran through her eyebrow. Before she had a chance to dwell on her injury, a movement caught her attention. The water was carrying someone directly toward her.

Hayden judged the distance and knew that if she could reach out and grab an arm, the flailing swimmer might have a chance. Or Hayden could be pulled from her precarious perch and they both could die. She had a split second to make her decision. Instinct won out, and she grabbed the victim's arm. A sharp pain pierced her shoulder at the sudden jolt of weight. She was strong from her habitual trips to the gym, but for a moment she almost let go. Dark, frightened eyes locked on hers and Hayden tightened her grip on both the victim and the tree branch. Both arms felt as though they were being ripped from her shoulders. Every breath burned her chest. With the strength she had left, she

lifted. The drag was intense, but the raging water finally released its prey. The victim, a woman, dangled barely conscious above certain death. Hayden didn't know if she had the strength to lift her onto the branch.

"Wake up," she bellowed over the roar. "You've got to help me." She was rewarded when the dark eyes opened once more. "That's right, stay with me. Can you move? Can you grab a hold of this branch?"

The woman was naked, her clothes torn from her body by the force of the water. She blinked a few times and spotted the branch. Hayden shouted encouragement as she reached up. The muscles in her arm screamed for relief. When she thought she couldn't stand the pain any longer, the woman got both legs around the branch and pulled herself up. She did not let go of Hayden's arm, but the insistent pressure was gone.

Emily Bradshaw hugged the branch, breathing heavily. She was aware of a hard texture pressed to her cheek, but her mind was still bobbing in the water. The feeling reminded her of drinking too much and falling into bed, swearing the bed was moving. She was afraid to open her eyes in case she was hallucinating and the woman she had clung to was a mirage and she was still being thrashed about in the raging water.

"Mary Mother of God."

A cry drew her fully present and she opened her eyes. Two children no more than three or four years old were headed right toward them, perched on what looked like the remnants of a door. Her rescuer prayed again and scurried farther out on the branch. Emily watched in disbelief as she hooked her legs around the branch and hung upside down over the raging water. Before Emily had a chance to move, the woman scooped up both children in her arms as their makeshift raft slammed into the tree, shattering into pieces.

"Help me." Hayden didn't know if the woman she'd rescued was conscious. In her current position, she wouldn't be able to lift

both children onto the branch, but she could not fathom letting one of them go. They were amazingly calm as they clung to her arm like stripes on a candy cane.

Hayden's thigh muscles had begun to cramp when she heard a thin voice insist, "Give him to me."

Emily summoned her remaining strength and reached down to grip the child closest to her. Dragging him up and gripping him firmly, she shimmied back to the hollow where the branch intersected with the tree trunk.

"You're okay, buddy. Stay right here and hang on to the tree. I'll be right back." With one last look at his pale, frozen face, Emily retraced her path.

She almost lost her balance as she reached down for the girl, swinging precariously over the raging water below. Saying a silent prayer, she gripped a small arm and yelled, "Got her."

Hayden breathed a sigh of relief. Her muscles threatened to give out when she tried to lift herself upright, but then her hand was grasped, giving her the leverage she needed.

When her rescuer was safe on their perch once more, Emily shifted the little girl from her arms and placed her behind the boy. She scooted behind both children, forming a cocoon around them as they leaned into the tree. A pair of strong arms slid past her to wrap all of them.

From behind her a voice rasped, "Thanks." Warm breath blew in Emily's ear. "I didn't think I could hold on."

"But you did. You were very brave." A question about their mysterious rescuer passed quickly through Emily's mind. Who would risk their life for a complete stranger? And then do it again for two more? Who was this hero?

The body pressed against her back was warm and solid, and Emily felt safe for the first time since she was swept out of her chair on the beach. With a long sigh, she let her head relax sideways on the sturdy bicep near her cheek.

"We're going to be all right," Hayden said as the woman in front of her shivered.

She sounded far more confident than she felt. Everywhere she looked was water, demolishing all in its path without regard to size, shape, or inhabitants. With the exception of the one they were perched in, almost every tree was ripped out of the ground. Moving closer, she enclosed the woman and two children in her arms. The girl was crying quietly. The sight tugged at Hayden's heart.

"It's okay, sweetie. You're safe now. Nothing's going to hurt you. We're going to take care of you." She continued saying soothing words, and almost immediately, both children fell into exhausted sleep.

"What are we going to do?" The woman in front of her spoke quietly.

Hayden didn't answer. What was she supposed to say? Given the circumstances, it seemed ridiculous to say they were going to be fine. It wasn't going to be that simple. Far from it.

The water marked a steady upward progress on the trunk of the tree as if claiming its stake. Hayden watched doggedly, unable to measure time except in the passage of debris and bodies, until the water slowly inched down and began to recede.



## CHAPTER TWO

**T**eetering on the precipice between wakefulness and slumber, cocooned from the world, Emily was slow to surface. A vague memory of a woman with desperate green eyes floated in and out of her mind. Emily tried to bring the image into sharp focus before it faded away, but in doing so she became more conscious and grimaced as she tried to move. Every bone in her body ached. Something hard pressed against her back and her ass hurt. When she finally forced her eyes open, she was disoriented.

The pale walls of her hotel room were gone, supplanted by the naked glare of daylight. Emily blinked in case she was still caught up in the remnants of a bad dream. She noticed the eerie quiet. There were no sounds of birds squawking or dogs barking, or the constant hum of people carrying on their everyday lives. As if on cue, her memory unlocked, and every sight and sound came flooding back. With it came an intense awareness that she was alive. Naked, in a tree. With strangers.

Destruction spread as far as she could see. Trees ripped from the ground lay strewn across the landscape like matchsticks. Building materials littered the area like confetti, a door here, a window over there. A sheet of plywood with stenciled letters lay propped against a car that was embedded in mud, the only thing visible its hood and headlights reflecting the midday sun. A piece

of mangled corrugated steel waved in the soft breeze like a flag erected after a long, bloody battle. Emily squinted recognizing one of the chairs that had been lined up like perfect soldiers around the hotel pool earlier that morning.

Her stomach churned, and she whispered, “Oh, my God,” when she realized that the shapes she thought were more debris were actual bodies. For some inane reason she started counting and vomited when she got to twenty-three.

“It’s okay.”

Startled by the voice behind her, Emily wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I feel like throwing up, too. It’s pretty awful.”

“What happened?” Emily knew the answer but couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“It must have been a tsunami.” Hayden had read about the massive waves but, like most people, had never come close to experiencing one. That had changed hours ago, at least she thought hours had passed. It could have been minutes. She’d lost track of time, guarding the three people she’d saved and waiting for the water to recede.

“A tsunami? That’s incredible.”

Hayden suppressed another bout of nausea. While her neighbors on the tree limb slept fitfully, her analytical mind had worked overtime to piece together the chain of events. “There must have been an underwater earthquake somewhere that triggered it. A fairly large one, to cause the wave that could do this kind of damage.”

“I went down to the beach after breakfast,” Emily said. “I’d just gotten there and I was trying to decide whether to get in the water first to stay cool, or wait till I got hot and then jump in. I remember seeing the water recede and I thought it was kind of strange that the tide would go out that far, almost to the reef. Hundreds of yards. All the seashells were exposed, and it was quiet, kind of like it is now. The next thing I knew I was in the

water.” She shivered as she realized just how narrow her escape from death really was.

Immediately a pair of tanned arms wrapped around her and a soft voice tickled her ear. “Are you cold?”

“No, just a flashback.” The hands moved slowly up and down her arms in a gesture of comfort that felt like a caress. The air was still. The only sound was the soft, rhythmic breathing of the children in front of them. Emily shuddered again and leaned into her rescuer’s comforting embrace.

“It’s okay.” The voice behind her was low and reassuring. “You’re in shock. We all are.”

Emily nodded, knowing if she tried to speak she would sob. She let herself relax, and for few minutes she didn’t move. Slowly she became aware of the source of the two hard buds pressed against her back and realized she wasn’t the only naked inhabitant of the branch. She started laughing.

“If you can find some humor in this situation, please share it with me.” Hayden held her breath, hoping it was humor and not hysteria that was causing her limb partner to laugh.

“Well, usually when I’m stark naked in a woman’s arms, we’ve at least exchanged names.”

Hayden wasn’t certain she’d heard correctly. “Excuse me?”

“I said I usually know the name of any woman I get naked with.” Emily was amazed that her sense of humor could survive in such a bleak situation. She bit her lip when she realized what she’d just said. If this woman was straight, she might just toss her off the branch. Somehow Emily doubted it.

Her neighbor chuckled. “Usually?”

“Well...” Emily didn’t get a chance to qualify her statement.

“I’m Hayden,” her rescuer said. “I’d offer to shake your hand, but the angle’s awkward and we’d probably fall out of the tree.”

“I’m Emily.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Emily. Do you come here often?”

Emily laughed. “I hope that’s not the line you use to get a woman naked.” She felt the nipples against her back tighten even more.

“No, I’m usually much more suave, but considering the rather compromising position we’re in, I thought I’d just jump to the chase.”

From her position behind Emily, Hayden had an unobstructed view of a pair of perfectly shaped breasts. Her hands tingled when she imagined how they would feel, and her lips ached to cover a tattoo of red lips on Emily’s left shoulder. Chastising herself for having such thoughts in an extremely serious situation, she moved back a little and immediately missed the warmth of Emily’s skin.

Obviously misunderstanding her withdrawal, Emily extended the space between them. “I’m sorry if I offended you. My mouth gets me in trouble all the time. I didn’t mean anything by that. I’m just...uh...look, forget I said anything.”

“I’m not offended. On the contrary, I was hoping I’d have a beautiful woman in my arms this afternoon. This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, but it’s certainly going to make a great story at parties.”

Emily expelled a breath she didn’t know she was holding. She turned around as much as she could, wanting to see the woman who’d saved her life. Clear green eyes looked back at her. Their faces were close enough that Emily could see the dark flecks that surrounded Hayden’s pupils. Short blond hair framed a face with just enough laugh lines to signify experience but not enough to give away her age. Strong cheekbones gave her face character, and at this moment she was smiling.

“You’re hurt.” Emily touched some dried blood over her eye. Fire burned from her fingertips and cascaded through her body. Mistaking the heat for fever, she settled her palm on Hayden’s

furrowed forehead. The skin felt cool but heat coursed through Emily again. Her eyes locked with those of her rescuer. The fever was inside her.

“I’m okay, just a scratch.”

Before she could stop herself Emily dropped her gaze to the chest that had provided such comfort and safety. A bikini tan line accentuated the pale mounds of two perfectly formed breasts. Pink nipples came to immediate attention and Emily’s mouth dropped open. She was no stranger to bare breasts, but the ones in front of her were the most beautiful she’d ever seen. She had to clench her fists to restrain herself from caressing them.

Time stood still. Hayden couldn’t look away. Emily’s fingers felt feather light and soothing. Desire flared to life and Hayden saw it mirrored in Emily’s eyes. She was unprepared for the strength of her own reaction. She’d had been instantly attracted to many women, but this was something different. It went deeper than the pulsing between her legs. It gripped her stomach like a hard fist. But this was not the time or the place to explore the feeling further.

Several moments passed before Hayden finally spoke. “Everything else all right?” She wanted to take Emily and make love to her under the afternoon sun for hours.

A flush of embarrassment ran up Emily’s neck. Mortified at what she’d just done, she didn’t know what to say, so she said nothing.

Hayden’s eyes burned with what Emily could only describe as desire. Finally, she bridged the awkward silence. “We’d better get out of this tree and take these kids somewhere safe.”

The children must have heard her reference because they started to stir. Emily dragged her gaze away from Hayden’s and caught their attention. “Hey, guys, time to wake up.” She spoke quietly so as not to frighten them and gently touched their shoulders. “My name is Emily. Can you tell me your name?”

“Victoria.” The voice was soft and weak.

“Victoria, that’s a mighty big name for such a little girl.”

“My name is Jake Nathaniel Hight and I’m five years old. My sister is only three. She’s the baby of the family.”

Emily smiled at the grown-up way the boy talked.

“I am not a baby, I’m a big girl.” She pronounced girl as if it were “gurl.”

Emily breathed a sigh of relief that the two children appeared to be unharmed by their ordeal. “Well, you two are really brave.”

“I’m brave just like my dad. He’s a policeman.”

Watching the exchange, Hayden quickly took inventory of their situation. With the exception of losing their clothing, they were all very lucky to have escaped serious injury. Hayden panned the horizon, not recognizing any landmarks. None were left standing. Buildings had been obliterated; their foundations remained as if ready to be used again. The lush green vegetation of Khao Lak that had not been uprooted and carried away lay limp, bent over from the force of the raging water.

Glancing up to the sky, Hayden judged the time of day to be early afternoon. Out of habit she looked at her left wrist and cursed herself for leaving her TAG Heuer watch in the safe in her hotel room. The large timepiece looked out of place with her bikini, and there was no reason to wear it while on the beach. It was not as if she had appointments to keep.

The sun was beating down and it wouldn’t be long before they were scorched. They all needed fresh water, and clothes to protect their skin from sunburn. It didn’t take more than a fleeting look to know that finding what they needed to survive was going to be a challenge.

Hayden forced a casual confidence that revealed no sign of her darker thoughts. “Hey, guys, my name is Hayden, have either of you climbed a tree before?”

