

## The Cave

The four friends laughed as they sat around the campfire, told stories, and made plans for the next day's adventure. Sven was the one who organized the trip. He had always been the adventurous one, and he spent countless hours searching the web and pouring through magazines, looking for unique vacation opportunities. Somehow he had found an outfitter who took groups to uninhabited islands in the Pacific and dropped them off with all the supplies and equipment they needed for a five day adventure. The island was tiny, of course, less than a mile in diameter, but with dozens of similar islands in the archipelago it was possible they were the first group to ever explore this particular island. And it was certainly possible they were the first group ever to dive its waters.

Sven had learned to dive years ago, when he was stationed at an Air Force base on Guam. That's where he met Josh and Nathan, who were also novice divers at the time. They dove nearly every weekend during their tour on Guam, and had gotten together several times since then for diving vacations. These were mostly freshwater dives, with a few dives off the US coast. Fun, but not nearly as spectacular as the reef and wreck diving they did when they were stationed in the Pacific. But it was what they could afford. They'd finally reached the point in life where they could afford to make a grand trip, and Sven had found a spectacular opportunity.

Ellen was relatively new to the group. She had never dived before she married Josh five years ago, but she quickly became an enthusiast. She and Josh took several dive trips by themselves, and she had joined the other three diving off the coast of North Carolina and on a sunken ship in Lake Superior. An amateur photographer, she bought an Olympus camera with a waterproof case to document these dives. This would be her first experience with reef diving. They all brought their own regulators and personal dive gear, and the outfitter left enough tanks to make one dive per day. That plus unlimited snorkeling opportunities would make an exciting week.

They'd spent the better part of two days on airplanes and a boat just getting to the island. None of them remembered exactly how long the trip had taken because they changed time zones multiple times and crossed the International Date Line, but it had been a long trip. Their excitement soon gave way to exhaustion. They banked the fire and spent a few minutes marveling at the stars overhead. When viewed with no interference from artificial light – no distant cities reflecting off clouds, no security lights, no highways with automotive traffic – the night sky was an awe-inspiring sight. Millions of stars stood out clearly against a pure black background, and the Milky Way cut a brilliant swath from horizon to horizon, splitting into two "tails" near the far edge. Ellen had never truly seen the night sky before, and she gasped with delight when a meteor briefly streaked across her view. Reluctantly, the friends said goodnight and retired to their tents. They dropped off to sleep listening to the lullaby of waves lapping against the nearby beach and the palm trees clicking in the breeze.

The next morning Sven managed to make powdered eggs that tasted almost real, thanks to the dried onion, cheese, and bacon bits which he liberally sprinkled into the pan. After breakfast they snorkeled near their campsite, looking for a good place to make their first dive. Every place they looked seemed to have something interesting, so after lunch they put on their tanks and dove the reef in front of their campsite.

Ellen was amazed at how clear the water was, and how warm. Josh had often told her about the diving he'd done off Guam, but she still wasn't prepared for this. She'd had to bundle up in a wet suit for her previous dives, and she still often got cold. This was truly "skin diving," with just a bathing suit and a T-shirt to protect her from the rough straps of her tank. She wore reef boots under her fins and gloves to protect her hands from the sharp coral, but her body luxuriated in the warm Pacific Sea. The water was so clear that at sixty feet she could still look up and see clouds drifting across the blue tropical sky. And the fish! The abundance of colorful life on the coral reef was simply amazing. Bright yellow angel fish, blue tangs, black and yellow-striped Moorish idols, butterfly fish, big-eyed squirrel fish, surgeon fish – she must have photographed a hundred different species on that one dive. A tiny orange and white clown fish swam right up to her mask and aggressively pecked at the glass, trying to chase her away from the sea anemone it lived in. She saw a tiny blue and silver cleaning wrasse pecking parasites off a much larger fish while the big fish floated motionlessly, enjoying the grooming. Josh motioned to her and pointed to a large turkey fish, floating upside down underneath a ledge. It looked beautiful, with its feathery spines surrounding a red, black, and white body, but Josh had warned her that each one of those spines could inflict an excruciatingly painful sting.

She was so enthralled by the dive that it was a shock when Josh signaled it was time to go up because their tanks were running low. It seemed like they'd only been down a few minutes, but it had been the better part of an hour. Normally reserved, Ellen was an absolute chatterbox during dinner, overflowing with enthusiasm for the dive they'd taken. The other three enjoyed the dive too, but this wasn't their first reef dive. They smiled knowingly at each other as Ellen talked, remembering their first dives off Guam. Ellen showed them some of her best pictures of the dive after dinner. She was surprised by the fact that some of the fish and most of the coral looked even more colorful in her pictures than they seemed during the dive. As clear as the water was, it had still filtered out much of the red sunlight, but her camera's flash brought out their true colors.

The next day they hiked to the west end of the island for their snorkeling and diving. There was a broad, sandy shallows at this end, supporting a diverse collection of snails and small shellfish. The reef was farther out from shore. It was similar to the reef they'd dived on the day before, but no less fascinating. They dove a little deeper this day, discovering sea fans and other intricate coral colonies.

On the third day they dove the northeast end of the island. There was only a narrow beach at this end, and tall limestone cliffs rose from the beach to the highest part of the island. This was the windward side, and although the trade winds were moderate the surf was noticeably higher than the areas they dove before. Underwater it was different too, with a steep, narrow reef that dropped precipitously much deeper than the divers wanted to venture. There were large rocks covering some areas, and exposed limestone. There weren't as many of the small, brightly colored reef fish that had delighted Ellen on their previous dives, but she saw larger fish which were new to her. She recognized the snappers, large triggerfish, mahi-mahi, and groupers. A shadow passed over her and she looked up to see a large school of silver fish which she thought might be tuna. She was less thrilled by the barracuda and the whitetip reef shark she saw, but they paid no attention to the divers.

Ellen was focusing her camera on large grouper that was holding its mouth wide open while a wrasse cleaned its lower lip when she felt herself drifting away from her subject. At first she thought it

was the back and forth eddying caused by the waves above her, but when she continued to move in the same direction she looked behind her and saw with horror that she was being drawn into an opening in the limestone. She began frantically kicking her fins to swim away, and at the same time Josh saw her and grabbed her hand to help pull her. She didn't have any trouble escaping the current and she began to think she had overreacted, but still the sensation of being pulled toward the hole made her uneasy the rest of the dive.

After dinner, when they were planning the next day's dive, Sven was very interested in the current that pulled her toward the limestone.

"Maybe the tide was coming in," Nathan suggested.

"Oh the tide was definitely rising," Sven said. "But why would it flow into that opening? If it was an underwater cave, it would already be full of water. The tide wouldn't affect it. But if the cave led to a cavern with air in it, then the water could compress the air and flow into the cavern."

"The cavern might vent to the outside," Josh suggested. "That would make it even easier for the water to flow in, as the air could flow out the vent. Limestone often has cracks and crevices. It's pretty porous."

"Either way it would be cool to see it," Nathan said. "I took an elevator down into a limestone cave in Kentucky once. It was filled with stalactites and stalagmites. There was a pool at the bottom that they said was part of an underground river. This cave might lead to a pool in a cavern like that."

"I've never tried cave diving before," Josh said.

"Neither have I," Nathan replied.

"None of us have," Sven said. "But I'd like to give it a try. We'd probably be the first humans to ever see the inside of that cavern."

"The current scares me," Ellen said. "I didn't have any trouble swimming against it, but I was outside the cave. Inside the cave it might be stronger."

Sven looked at the tide chart he had brought with him. "The high tide tomorrow afternoon is at 2:45. If we enter the cave a little before that, say at 2:30, we should have a fairly gentle current flowing into the cave, and by the time we're ready to come back out we'll have a gentle current flowing out of the cave. We brought flashlights in case we decided to make a night dive, and we've all got gloves. It would probably be a good idea to wear jeans and a long-sleeved shirt to protect us from any rough spots we might bump against."

The three men began to talk excitedly about the next day's dive. Ellen was disappointed, as she would rather dive on a colorful reef, but she kept quiet. Reef diving was new to her, but it was old hat to the others. She could understand why they would want to try something different. Besides, they

were much more experienced divers than she was. They'd planned this trip, and so far it had been the adventure of a lifetime. Maybe tomorrow would be exciting, too.

The next morning they snorkeled the reef in front of their campsite, as everyone agreed that was a better place to snorkel than the rough waters near the cave. Ellen took more pictures of the colorful fish she'd seen before, and she got pictures of several new ones, too. There was a beautiful Emperor Angel nestled in some shadows, but she waited patiently until it came into the sunlight and she got a gorgeous picture of it.

After lunch they carried their gear to the narrow beach on the northeast side of the island and waited for the tide. When it was nearing its peak, they entered the water. Ellen was surprised by how restricted she felt in her jeans and long-sleeved shirt. She realized she'd been spoiled by the short sleeve diving they'd been doing and wondered if she'd feel claustrophobic the next time she put on a wet suit. Sven entered the cave first, Ellen followed, and Josh followed her. Nathan brought up the rear. The current was relatively gentle, and Ellen wasn't as nervous as she'd feared, although there was one narrow section of the passage that scared her. She would have turned back if she had been leading the dive, but Sven managed to turn his body sideways and shot through the narrow spot. Sven was bigger than Ellen, so she followed his lead. She wanted to ease her way through, but the water was flowing much faster through the narrow opening so she, too, shot through the hole. She waited, nervously, until Josh and Nathan made it through safely before following Sven. The cave angled upward and suddenly her head was above the water. Sven had climbed out of the water and was standing on the floor of a cave, shining his flashlight on the walls and ceiling. The other three joined him.

"It's not as big as I'd hoped, and I don't see any interesting stalactite formations, but it is an open chamber," he said.

The others explored the cave with their flashlights. It looked creepy to Ellen. She wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"I don't think we're the first human beings to set foot in this cave," Nathan said. He was shining his light on something about ten feet away.

"What's that?" Josh asked.

"Looks like some kind of cloth," Nathan replied. "Or maybe a tarp."

They edged their way around the pool to take a closer look. Nathan was the first one in line. He grabbed a fold and lifted it slightly. "It's heavy," he said. "And slimy. It's covered with some kind of mold, I think. Look, it's white underneath."

They were all clustered around the cloth now, feeling it.

"I think it's a piece of sail," Sven said. "It looks like it's covering something. Let's lift it off."

The cloth was stiff and covered with mold that made it heavy and slippery, but they quickly pulled it off. It was covering a large wooden barrel.

"I think that's a hogshead," Josh said. I've seen them in maritime museums. Ships used to carry provisions and cargo in them."

There was no top on the barrel and they shone their flashlights into it.

"There's more cloth inside it," Nathan said. He reached into the barrel and pulled out a large piece of sailcloth.

They stared into the barrel in amazement. Sven said "Holy. . ." but got no further. The bottom of the barrel was filled with gold ingots.

Nathan reached into the barrel to lift out an ingot. It was much heavier than he expected, and he used both hands to lift it out. There were Chinese characters stamped into the top of the ingot. Ellen took several pictures of it.

"Who would leave a barrel of gold in a cave?" Josh asked.

"Pirates?" Nathan suggested. "I know there were pirates in the Caribbean. I suppose there were Pirates in the Pacific, too."

"There must be close to a dozen ingots here," Josh said as he shined his flashlight in the barrel.

"Why would pirates leave this much gold in a cave?" Sven asked. "I never believed the stories about buried treasure. Why would anyone risk their life attacking a ship, steal valuables, and then bury it?"

"Maybe they were hiding it until they could find a buyer," Ellen suggested. "I mean, this much gold, it must have been a big deal when they stole it. There had to be a lot of people looking for it, and it would have meant death if anyone found it on their ship. And it must have been hard to find someone who would buy this much gold and not ask questions."

"Whatever the reason, it's ours now" Sven said.

"How are we going to get it out of here?" Nathan asked.

"Well, we can each carry a bar with us when we leave today, and they we'll rig up a sling or something to carry the rest at high tide tomorrow." Sven suggested.

"Are you kidding?" Ellen asked. "I can barely hold on to a bar when I'm standing here. There's no way I can navigate the narrow part of that cave while using both hands to carry a gold brick."

“We’ll have to hold the bar out in front of us when we go through the narrow spot,” Sven said. “I realize that takes a lot of upper body strength, so maybe just the three guys should try it today.”

Ellen decided to ignore the comment about upper body strength. She lifted weights and did push ups as part of her normal exercise routine, but that wasn’t the point. “It’s not a question of upper body strength,” she said. “It’s a question of needing to use our hands to position ourselves to go through the narrow spot. We can’t do that if we’re clutching a heavy object. I don’t think it’s safe and I won’t do it.”

“I’m willing to give it a shot,” Nathan said.

Josh hesitated a moment and then said “I’ll try it. If it doesn’t work we can drop the gold and come back for it tomorrow, when we’ve got a better way to carry it.”

“OK,” Sven said. “We’ll need to add some air to our BCs to offset the weight of the gold.” They all had buoyancy compensators, a type of inflatable life jacket, built into their scuba harnesses. The three men added air to their BCs, picked up a gold bar, stepped back into the water, and then added or vented air as needed to float weightlessly in the water. Ellen pulled her mask over her face and followed them.

Sven led the way into the cave. They had stayed longer than planned, and he could feel the current strengthening as the ebbing tide pulled water out of the cave. When he approached the narrow section he extended his hands holding the gold bar in front of his head. Shifting this much weight forward caused his body to tilt downward. His hands banged into the rocky floor of the cave, causing his body to somersault until his legs hit the cave roof. Instinctively he let go of the gold and pushed away from the floor, using his hands to guide him as the current swept him into the narrow part of the cave. Ellen used her hands to guide her as she swept through the narrows after him.

Seeing the problems Sven had extending his arms, Josh tucked his gold bar into his belly, holding his arms tightly against his sides. Not being able to use his hands to guide him, he bumped and scraped against the roof of the cave as he was swept into the narrows. Suddenly his tank caught on a protruding rock. The current pushed his back and legs forward, flattening him against the opening to the narrows and pinning him there. He dropped the gold bar, but his shoulders were far enough into the narrows that he couldn’t raise his arms to push back against the cave walls.

Once Ellen was through the narrows and into a wider portion of the cave, where the current wasn’t as strong, she turned around to make certain the others made it through. She saw her husband wedged in the narrows, with a panicked look on his face. Equally alarming, she saw a stream of bubbles coming from behind his head, and she worried that his air line might be cut. Kicking madly, she managed to swim against the current to get to him but she had nothing to brace herself against to push or pull him out of the narrows. She grabbed his shoulders and tried to shake him free, but her body just slid forward and backward without moving his. Suddenly she felt him slide back into the narrows and then shoot forward. Nathan slid through the opening immediately afterward and the three of them quickly surfaced and staggered onto the beach. Sven was waiting for them.

“There you are! I was beginning to worry . . .” The smile disappeared from Sven’s face when he saw the panic and exhaustion in the faces of the others.

“I got caught in the narrows,” Josh said, still breathing heavily. “My arms were pinned to my sides. There was nothing I could do.”

“I felt so helpless,” Ellen said. “I saw you were stuck, but I couldn’t brace myself against anything to pull you free.”

“Nathan pulled me free,” Josh said. “Thank you Nathan!”

“I saw you were stuck,” Nathan said, “so I braced my feet against the cave, grabbed your backpack, and pulled you back until you were free of whatever it was that was holding you there. I let go and the current pushed you through. I had to drop the gold to do it, though.”

“You saved my life,” Josh said. “As far as I’m concerned, you made the right decision.”

“We all dropped our gold,” Sven said. “I guess that’s not a good way to carry it out of the cave.”

“I saw bubbles streaming from behind your head,” Ellen told Josh. “Is your air line cut?”

“No,” Josh replied, examining his gear. Then he saw something. “Damn! Those sharp rocks cut my BC. That’s where the bubbles were coming from.”

“I think we need to go back to camp, put on some dry clothes, and put today’s dive behind us,” Sven said. “You know that mahi-mahi we caught yesterday? The one we were saving for a ‘last night of vacation’ banquet tomorrow night? I think maybe we need a special dinner tonight.”

Dry clothes and a good meal made everyone feel better. Preparing a meal and cleaning up afterward takes a long time in a primitive campsite. Building a fire, letting it burn down to coals for cooking, boiling water to wash dishes – all these activities take time. The sun was long gone and the stars were shining by the time the work was over and the group gathered around the campfire. Sven was the one who broke the ice and began talking about diving.

“About tomorrow,” he said. “I was thinking maybe we could use a pair of jeans to carry a bar of gold. Wrap it up in the seat and tie the legs around our waist.”

“What?!” Ellen asked in astonishment. “You’re not seriously thinking about going back into that cave, are you?”

Sven looked dumbfounded. “Well, yeah. I mean, how else are we going to get the gold out? We can’t just leave it there.”

“My husband nearly died today, trying to carry that damn gold out of the cave. We’re lucky we weren’t all killed. And you want to go back and try it again?”

“Ellen!” Nathan broke in. “There must be millions of dollars’ worth of gold in that cave!”

“And you think that’s worth dying for?” Ellen shot back.

“I was only stuck for a moment,” Josh said. “Nathan gave a little tug and I was free.”

“And what if you’d been the last one in line? Nobody could have freed you from in front. I tried, and I couldn’t budge you. You’d have been stuck there until the tide changed, and by then you’d be dead.”

“We’re not going to carry the gold in our hands again.” Nathan tried to sound reassuring. “That was a bad idea. I admit it. We need our hands to guide our way through the narrows. We know what doesn’t work, now we need to try something that will work.”

“And what if this idea doesn’t work? That gold will be like an anchor tied to your waist. Especially Josh. His BC is ripped so he can’t put air in it. He’s going to be super heavy. He’s going to drag along the bottom until that gold gets caught on something.”

“Worst case we just untie the jeans,” Sven said.

“Not in the narrows, you won’t! There’s not enough room for that. You think you can reach behind you, around your tank, and untie a wet knotted pair of jeans while the current is banging you against the walls? And what if two of you make it out and one gets stuck. Are you going to look at the two bars of gold you managed to get out and say ‘Yeah, it was worth losing a friend for this?’”

“There’s a lot more gold than that in there,” Nathan said.

“Right. And just how many bars do you think you can carry?” Ellen asked.

“We’ll have to make multiple trips,” Sven said.

This time it was Ellen’s turn to be astonished. “So you’re not just going to go in when the tide’s behind you and go out when it’s receding? You’re going to make trips against the tide? And the longer it takes, the worse that current’s going to get. It will be impossible to claw your way through the narrows when you’re going against the current, and with the current you’ll be banging around so fast you’ll be out of control. You’re sure to get stuck. Like Josh did.”

“What do you suggest?” Nathan asked.

“Forget the damn gold and leave this island alive!”



The three men looked at each other as though they were trying to find a way to reason with a crazy person. Ellen could see her arguments had fallen on deaf ears.

“I want nothing to do with this” she declared, and she stomped off to her tent.

She lay awake for a long time until she heard Josh come into the tent. When he had settled into his sleeping bag she rolled over and faced him.

“Please tell me you’re not going to dive in cave tomorrow,” she said.

“I have to,” he replied. “This is the opportunity of a lifetime. I can’t just walk away from it. Don’t you see? This will set us up for the rest of our lives!”

“Not if you get killed,” Ellen said. “If you go into that cave, the rest of your life might just be a few minutes.”

“I’m not going to get killed,” Josh insisted. “I’m going to go in the middle because my BC’s torn. Sven will be in front of me and Nathan will be behind me. They’ll be there to help if I get into any trouble.”

“You don’t know what kind of trouble you might get into,” Ellen argued. “Nobody does. Especially when the current picks up. What if Nathan or Sven gets into trouble and you can’t help because the current’s too strong? How are you going to feel then?”

“We’re not going to get into any trouble,” Josh said. “Look, we said we wanted to have kids some day. This will make it easier. We’ll have all the money in the world!”

“Oh, Josh! I don’t want all the money in the world. All I want is you. Alive.” She reached over and hugged him. “I love you.”

“And I love you too,” Josh said, hugging her back. “I’m doing this for you, really. Don’t you see?”

Ellen drew back when he said this. She realized he had no idea how she felt. He was just trying to convince her that what he’d already decided to do was the right thing. She turned her back on him and stared at the tent wall. She stayed awake for hours, thinking about the cave. And the gold. And how dangerous the dive would be. She was still awake long after Josh and the others had fallen asleep.

The next morning nobody said a word about the disagreement the night before. Everyone smiled and joked as they fixed breakfast, but it was a forced casualness. People were carefully avoiding the tension that still hung in the air. It wasn’t until after breakfast, when Sven said he was going to check the dive gear, that the conflict surfaced.

“Nobody’s going diving today,” Ellen declared as she dried the last dish and stowed it with the camping gear.

Sven replied in a calm, measured voice. "I'm sorry, Ellen. We all know how you feel, but you can't tell the rest of us what to do."

"I know that. You made that abundantly clear last night. That's why I vented the tanks."

"You what?!"

"I vented the tanks. I opened the valves and let the air out."

"You had no right to do that!"

"Maybe not, but I did it anyway."

"Ellen! Why?" Josh looked stricken as he asked this.

"Because I only have a few close friends and one husband!" Ellen's emotions broke free as she said this. "I can't afford to lose any of them trying to drag gold bars through a deadly tunnel!"

The other three stared at Ellen in astonishment. She calmed down and continued. "Besides, you would have squandered our last day on this island trying to drag that gold through the tunnel. If you'd been very lucky you might have all survived and come back with two or three bars, but you'd have lost the opportunity to find a safe way to retrieve all the gold."

"All of the gold?" Nathan asked.

"I was thinking about this last night. How do you suppose the pirates carried the gold into that cavern in the first place?"

"They probably dragged it through the same tunnel we used," Nathan said. "The sea level was lower back then."

"That tunnel is thirty feet down!" Ellen said. "The sea level hasn't risen thirty feet in the last two or three hundred years. All the historic ports would be under water."

"Then there must be another way into that cave," Josh said.

"Exactly!" Ellen turned to Sven. "You said there must be a big cavern or a vent, otherwise the tide wouldn't have pushed water in and out of the tunnel. The cavern wasn't that big, so there must be a vent. The pirates used the vent to carry the gold into the cavern. We didn't see daylight when we were in the cavern, so there must be a few turns in the vent. Or maybe the opening is overgrown with vines. Either way, it's got to be above ground, and if we can find it, we can carry the gold out the same way the pirates carried it in."

It only took a few minutes for the four friends to get ready to search for the other cave entrance. They reasoned the entrance must be somewhere on the limestone hill that dominated the northeast end of the island. Most of the island was typical of a coral atoll - low, sandy, and covered with palm trees. Eons ago volcanic or seismic activity had shoved the coral reef upward at the northeast end, creating a limestone hill with a white cliff that towered above the beach. They surveyed the cliff from the beach but saw no openings. Beyond the cliff they found a place where the hill sloped gently down to the beach. They began climbing the hill at this point, staying close to the cliff so they could keep their bearings. When they were directly above the opening to the underwater cave they turned and walked away from the beach, following the course of the cave as best they remembered it.

It was tough walking through the tropical forest. The underbrush wasn't too thick and they could weave their way through most of it, although there were aggravating thorn bushes which scratched their arms and clutched at their clothes. Nathan remembered that on Guam they were called "wait-a-bits," because that's what you said to your hiking buddies when you got caught in one. The thin soil barely covered the rough limestone underneath, but it supported a number of thin, scraggly trees whose roots anchored to cracks in the underlying limestone. Occasionally they'd see a papaya or something they recognized, but mostly it was just unknown "jungle trees." Several trees looked like something drawn by Dr. Suess. Twisted white branches ended in clumps of green dangling leaves. Roots grew out of the trunk a foot or two above the ground, fanning out in a "cone" that braced the tree against storm winds. These roots also caused a great deal of tripping and swearing. Worst of all, once they had walked a few feet away from the cliff the trade winds no longer cooled their body. The air was deathly still, hot, and humid.

The team spent hours looking for another opening to the cavern. There was a sandy "meadow" near the spot they thought was roughly over the top of the cavern, and they used that as their reference point. It was the only place where sunlight penetrated the tree canopy, so it was easy to spot. They would start there, spread out as far as they could while staying within sight of one another, and walk away from the cavern until they reached the bottom of the hill. Then they'd retrace their steps to the meadow and set off in a slightly different direction. By late afternoon they had searched in every possible direction, covering a complete circle from the meadow to the base of the hill or the edge of the cliff. No one had seen anything that remotely resembled a cave opening. They were exhausted, hungry, and had long since emptied their water bottles. They sat in the shade next to the meadow and debated what to do next. Ellen stared vacantly at the scraggly weeds that covered the sandy spot they called a meadow.

"How'd that sand get up here?" she asked.

"It probably blew up here," Nathan answered, not bothering to look.

"Long way to blow, especially since there's no wind in this damn jungle. Has anyone seen sand anywhere else?"

Josh and Nathan muttered "Huh-uh." Sven just shrugged.

“So why is that the only spot with sand? For that matter, why is that the only spot with no trees?” Ellen reiterated.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Then Josh spoke. “Where do you think the sand came from?”

“I think someone carried it up here,” Ellen said.

“Why would they do that?” Nathan asked. His tone clearly showed he wasn’t convinced.

“To bury something. Between the rocks and the roots they couldn’t scrape much dirt from the jungle so they got sand from the beach. There’s something hidden under that sand. Who’s got the shovel?” Ellen answered.

Nathan handed her the folding camp shovel. She stepped into the clearing and jabbed the shovel into the sand, like she was spearing a fish. There was a metallic “tink” as the point struck limestone underneath the sand. She tested several other spots with the same result. Then she tested a spot that produced a dull “thunk.”

The three men were instantly beside her, clearing away the weeds and sand. A few inches down they began to uncover wood. It looked almost like a railroad tie. Several of them. Josh stuck the shovel under one end and used it as a lever to jiggle the wood free.

“Careful,” Sven warned. “It may be rotten.”

“I hope not,” Ellen answered. “I was standing on it a moment ago.”

“It might be teak,” Nathan suggested. They used to build ships out of teak because it doesn’t rot. Ships carried spare beams to make emergency repairs.”

Josh succeeded in lifting one end of the board he was jiggling high enough that they could grab it with their hands. The three men lifted that end up high enough that they could see underneath it. The other end was still wedged tightly between the boards on either side of it.

Nathan shined his flashlight into the hole where the board had been and peered into it. “It’s a long way down,” he said.

“Thirty or forty feet,” Sven added.

“I can see water off to one side,” Ellen said. “I think we’re directly over the cavern.”

“I saw some vines near the bottom of the hill,” Nathan said excitedly. “We could make a rope out of them.”

For once Sven was the voice of caution. "I don't think it's a good idea to risk anyone's life to a wild vine dangling into a deep pit. Ever since we first saw that gold we've been rushing around like we had to get it out right now. It's probably been there for two hundred years. I think it can stay there a little while longer so we can plan things out and come back with the tools we need to get it out safely."

"We'll run out of daylight soon," Ellen said. "And we need to start packing up the camp. The ship's coming for us tomorrow."

"Let's push this beam back into place and cover it with sand so nobody sees it until we can come back with the stuff we need to do this right," Josh said.

As they were covering the beam with sand Nathan said "You know, guys. When I said the gold was ours now, I forgot we weren't in the US. Not every country has a 'finders keepers' law. We need to do a little research into the laws of . . . I don't even know what country owns the Marshall Islands."

"I think they're their own country," Ellen said.

"OK. We still need to do some research. I think most countries at least share treasure with the finders, but I'd rather be moderately wealthy in the US than rich in a foreign prison."

"I took pictures of the gold bars," Ellen said. "I can do some research to find out what they are, and how much they're worth."

"How ever it turns out," Josh said, "it has been a fun and exciting vacation. I'll give it that."

"And I think I know where we're going on our next vacation," Sven added.