

RIVERTIME
By Rae Renzi

Chapter One

As a solution to vexing personal problems, death by misadventure had a certain grim economy, Casey allowed. An icy wave crashed over the side of the inflatable river raft she rode, hurling a tree branch into her side. Its rough bark scraped the skin from her ribs. She yelped in pain and choked on the river water that poured down her throat. Coughing violently, she snatched a gulp of air and scrambled to regain her hold on the half-submerged cargo ropes only seconds before another wave shoved her under.

A few long, lung-convulsing seconds later, the raft broke the surface like a breaching whale and began to spin, half in the air and half on the water. It slammed into a boulder, tipped, and jumped forward, bucking and kicking. The wild tossing flipped Casey's legs this way and that, banging them painfully against the metal food lockers, threatening to wrench the ropes out of her hands. She gritted her teeth and hugged the ropes closer to her chest, trying to wedge her battered body between the raft bottom and the cargo hold.

After what felt like an eternity, the raft gave up speed and slid behind the leading edge of the flash flood. Casey lifted her head, praying for flat, empty water. She saw instead, dead ahead, a mass of spiky basalt columns thrusting up toward the sky, bisecting the river with beautiful and deadly precision. To the right, the river cut through a narrow channel, deep and fast. To the left, it spilled into a wider course, slower but peppered with tumbled-down boulders. She scarcely knew which to hope for.

The raft crashed against the rock columns and stuck. It began to shimmy with the pounding rhythm of the river. Casey stared with barely contained panic as the prow slowly lifted and folded toward her. Pinned against the boulder, going neither right nor left, pummeled by the relentless water—if the craft didn't shift, it would soon capsize. She took a deep breath and scrambled hand-over-hand onto the mound of cargo lashed down in the middle of the raft. Only acute awareness that doing nothing at all would be fatal gave her the will to drop the ropes and dive for the prow with every bit of punch she could muster.

It was enough. Her weight shifted the raft so it slid to the left, away from the rocks. Like a pinball, it bounced from boulder to boulder until it fetched up against a large one. The river boiled under it, lifting one side. Casey regained her grip on the ropes. The raft scooted toward the riverbank, teetered on its edge for a second, and fell flat with a loud slap.

In the sudden, eerie silence, Casey jerked her head up and noisily sucked air into her lungs. The raft rocked in the current, gently sloshing water back and forth over her

legs. The world seemed split—an unnatural stillness inside the boat overlaid by the growling roar of the river outside.

She waited for another onslaught, but seconds stretched into minutes and nothing changed. She raised herself from her belly to her knees and relinquished her death grip on the cargo ropes to push dripping strands of hair out of her eyes.

The raft was grounded on a sandbar behind a spill of enormous boulders that extended from the slopes of the canyon into the river. Beyond the sandbar was a short stretch of flat water, and then beautiful, lovely, wonderful dry land.

Her hands were stiff, formed into claws by her grip on the ropes. She slowly straightened her fingers. The rope burns across her palms were hot but not bloody. Gloves. Next time, she'd wear gloves.

The rest of her body seemed more or less intact. Everything moved, nothing felt broken, although a deep scratch down the outside of her left thigh streaked her leg with bright red blood. She rolled into a sitting position, tempted to rest against the pontoon, but a quick recap of her last few minutes set up a clamoring in her brain to get out of the raft and onto dry ground. With a shred of forethought, she fumbled her backpack free of the cargo ropes before dragging herself out of the raft and into the frigid water.

Halfway to the bank, tremors suddenly took her, rattling her teeth. She stumbled out of the water, took five steps and collapsed face-first onto the beach.

Never had sand up her nose felt so good. Feebly puckering her lips, she kissed the ground and rolled onto her back, reveling in warm, dry terra firma. She stuck a trembling hand into her backpack, found her zip-locked stash of chocolate and stuffed a hunk into her mouth.

The combination of heat and chocolate worked its magic. “God bless chocolate.” Within a few minutes the shaking subsided, and her thoughts labored toward coherency.

What now?

The rest of her river-rafting group would be stranded on the cliff trail they'd hiked up after lunch—Casey alone had stayed with the raft, claiming a headache. The guide would radio for help, but it might take some time. She could be here a while—maybe even overnight.

She wished Reed were here. He'd know what to do next. He'd have a plan, probably would have had one before starting on a raft trip. He was like that.

Casey struggled upright and looked around. Rocks, shrubs, sand, a few scrubby trees scattered here and there, the jewel-bright confetti of wildflowers tossing in the wind, and the towering walls of the canyon reaching up to the heavens. It had the feel of an enormous cathedral, glorious and awe-inspiring, a place of unshakable peace.

And very, very empty.

She had gone on the river-rafting trip seeking just this—peace and quiet, a chance to take stock and reflect on her life, present and future, and to finally make the decision that had been gnawing at her for too long.

She snorted. Well, the flash flood had certainly reordered her priorities. Reflecting on her life still topped the list, but it had undergone a sudden, piquant shift in meaning. With a flap of her hand, she consigned interpersonal decisions to the bottom of the pile. In this context, they were insignificant.

Life—as in whether she survived—*that* was the next priority.

For her birthday last year, a fellow student had given her a little book called *The Worst Case Scenario: A guide to survival*. It was intended as a jab at graduate school, but Casey had read it cover-to-cover. The author stressed four important points for survival—shelter, food, water, fire, in order of importance.

So first, shelter. Struggling to her feet, she took a critical look at her surroundings. The beach stretched along a small clear stream that rambled down from the sandstone cliffs like a spill of broken glass, eventually finding a path into the river. At the moment the beach was partly underwater, but bits of grass poking up here and there hinted at its normal contour. Beyond the beach, terraced ledges stepped up to the canyon walls. Casey spied a dirt path—obviously, she wasn't the first human to tread here—and was relieved to see that it led to a large open cavern hollowed out in the canyon walls.

She picked up her backpack and plodded up to the cavern. It was larger than it looked from below, probably twenty feet tall, but wide and shallow, a bowl-shaped depression scooped out of the rock eons ago. The cavern walls, a smooth pinkish-gold sandstone with long curving swirls and striations, gave off the specific smell of the river, an unlikely mix of dust and dampness. In the back of the cavern, where it sloped down to meet the floor, ledges of sandstone poked out, like shelves waiting to be filled.

“Good. This is good.” It was too open to be snug, but coupled with her tent would keep her dry if it rained. She glanced at the sky. It was clear now, but the wind was picking up, and a dark line of clouds—probably the source of the flash flood—stained the northern horizon. Sooner or later, shelter might be needed.

Check item number one off the list.

Food, second in priority, meant going back to the raft. Her mind mutinied at the thought of re-entering the water, but pitted against hunger? No contest. In spite of her slight build, she was a girl who liked her meals. She also needed to get more clothes, which meant digging out her dry bag.

Having a clear goal spurred her on. She emptied her backpack, lining up its contents—sunscreen, sunglasses, a notebook, a pencil, chocolate, a T-shirt—against the back wall of the cavern, slung the empty pack over one shoulder and made her way back to the beach. With one foot in the water, she hesitated. It was achingly cold, worse this time than the last, but she had no choice. She set her jaw and waded in, counting the steps to the raft. At least here it was shallow, so she was only numb from midcalf down.

As she started to clamber aboard, a splash of unnatural color on the other side of the stream caught her eye. Something bright yellow was wedged between two of the boulders, bobbing in the current. Someone's washed-overboard gear, no doubt. Was it worth the effort to fetch?

She sighed. Probably not, but she'd do it anyway, save one of her fellow river-rafters from the loss. She pushed off the raft and slogged across the stream toward the boulders, squinting at the object. What she could see seemed too rounded to be an ice chest, and too bulky for a tent. Maybe a backpack?

Suddenly, Casey stopped in her tracks. Her brain rejected what her eyes saw—a bright yellow life vest wrapped around a body.

“Oh my God!” She broke into a run.