**18Don’t look now**

The holiday was going to plan when it happened like a flash of an eyelash when confronted with a mascara brush. I was togged up in snorkel, mask and flippers supplied by the tour operator. The Great Barrier Reef shimmering under the dappled blue sky. The sun watching, while the hot breeze lapped at my shoulders.

Waiting on the pontoon for the guide, I wondered how many people in the group were virtually none-swimmers, like myself. Don’t get me wrong, I can swim a few strokes and keep my head above water; that is, until the panic sets in.

I didn’t suppose it mattered to the woman on my right. She looked confident enough in her orange swim suit. But with that smug grin across her face, I knew she wouldn’t help me if I got into difficulty.

Never mind, I’d snorkelled before. Admittedly it was at the shore-line in Cornwall where the only sea creatures were a few fingerlings and the occasional crab. But the Barrier Reef – well that was a different matter. I was nowhere near the shore, instead I was perched on a make-shift raft in the middle of the Coral Sea that stretched out into the Pacific Ocean.

Perhaps I should have gone up in the glass bottomed helicopter? Or sailed around the reef in the glass bottomed boat? I thought as I looked at the other explorers in my group.

There was a young guy of about twenty-five standing behind me, too close for my liking. Someone to be avoided? I suddenly changed my mind when I saw his enormous biceps which gave the impression that he could haul at least three people out of the water in one go.

I considered staying next to the biceps, until I noticed the guy with blond hair. He had such wonderful sumptuous lips, capable of giving the kiss of life, even to a shark. Yes, I would definitely stay near to him.

Just as I was enjoying the thought, a scrawny looking guy with curly brown hair that almost covered his blue eyes, appeared. He was fully kitted out, including a wet suit.

‘Hi, I’m Brian, your coach for the next hour,’ he said in a bland voice that would have suited a funeral director. I didn’t expect this from an Ozzie. When he said he was a Brit on a gap year – that explained everything.

‘Gather round,’ he gestured to our group. ‘I’m just going to go over the safety procedures with you all; then we can make a move.’ He lifted a clip-board and took out a pencil. Asking set questions, he ticked off the answers. Completing his survey, he began to sum up.

‘As four of you can’t swim, and two of you are nervous, you’ll just need to keep with me. Then, when we enter the water, you can take hold of the ropes on the inflatable lifebuoy that I’ll have ready. The rest of you can swim near. If you get into any difficulty, you must let me know as soon as possible.’ Most of the group nodded.

My confidence in Brian grew as he spoke. Forgetting about the glass bottomed helicopter and the boat, I was ready. And knowing that, if I stayed near to Brian, the biceps and the lips, I would be safe.

‘Just get on with it mate, we haven’t got all bloody day.’ The voice of a red-haired guy belched out with the smell of lager.

‘Sorry, Sir, but I can see you’ve been drinking,’ said Brian in an authoritative tone.

‘What if I have mate, that’s no concern of yours, only mine.’

‘It is *my* concern. You had the instructions, no alcohol or drugs. That’s the rules. If you’ve been drinking, I can’t be responsible for you, it’s too risky. So, I’m sorry, but you can’t join the group.

‘Nonsense. What’s stopping me from jumping off this pontoon and taking myself on the tour? The seas free isn’t it mate?’

‘Yes, but if you jump off you’ll have to do it on your own back.’

‘Well that’s great. You mean to say that I’ve come all the bloody way from Perth, paid for the tour, and now you’re saying I must go it alone? And I suppose that, if I get into trouble out there, you’ll leave me to die. Is that it?’

‘I didn’t say the latter. But I have to look after the welfare of these other people first.’

Before Brian could say any more, the guy threw an empty lager bottle into the recycle bin, jumped into the sea, gave a vulgar gesture, and swam away.

Brian apologised for the incident, asked if anyone else had been drinking. Finding out that no one had, he ticked the last box and turned to the group again.

‘Right, let’s go. And as I said,’ Brian turned to address the other five people with me, ‘safety first. And remember, as you hold onto the ropes on the lifebuoy, just flip your feet in a gentle swimming motion to avoid damaging the coral.’

As we slipped into the calm blue sea, I could almost hear the hiss of cool water on hot bodies. The ripples around us whisked up the unmistakable smell of fish and other creatures of the deep. Fumbling a little for the rope on the lifebuoy, I eventually grabbed it and clung on tightly along with the other non-swimmers. Other members of our group drifted around us, including the guys with the biceps and the lips.

Swimming tranquilly along, Brian pulled the lifebuoy and pointed to various shoals of multi-coloured fish, some of which travelled with us and gave welcoming nudges at our bodies.

The coral, like a gigantic glistening orchestra of gems, seemed to sing when the angles of light touched its delicate surfaces. Bubbles sprang upwards through the blues, greens, yellows and purples – defying any rainbow.

In a flash the serene moment had gone, replaced by a dark deep chasm. My breathing quickened. I tried my hardest not to look down as we traversed the precipices between the mountains of coral and the deep of the ocean. Breathing slowly again, I told myself to keep calm and concentrate on the spectacular scenery that I was witnessing. But the undulating seaweed, like the tremulous fingers of some sea creature, seemed to beckon me into the depths.

Seconds later, we were at the edge of the coral again. Floating over the area, I instinctively tightened my chest and abdominal muscles to avoid touching the delicate choral. It shimmered and seemed to moan in chorus as I resisted the temptation to touch it. The place was magical, exciting, quiet and tranquil, and full of mystique – echoes of a lost world.

The tranquillity disappeared with the dart of a body here. The lash of a tail there. It told of the hunter and the hunted.

Calm again, the rippling water caressed my body, lulling me into submission – buoyant in the ocean of life that drifted around me. Still. Sleepy…

All too soon I was plunged into reality; awake. A sudden swell of water took my body – hurling it at the pontoon and scraping my arm across its barnacles. Blood oozed from the gouge. All I could think of was sharks. My eyes thrust wide open as they scudded the ocean. Was that a dark shadow in the water or just the outline of a boat under the pontoon?

No. It was getting closer, bigger, threatening. It kept on coming like a black coated figure emerging from some smog in a London street. I couldn’t move, shout, or breath. My tongue had adhered to the roof of my mouth. My brain fired on all synapses, trying to register what I had seen – there was no catalogue to identify it in my archives. The only signal I received was: ‘don’t look now – just get out of the water – *fast*.’

With the strength of an athlete going for gold, I tried to wrench myself upwards, my body as light as a meringue, but it felt like concrete as it lashed against the pontoon again. More blood oozed from my arm. Something was grabbing at my foot. I let out a silent scream. The rest of the group, oblivious to my plight, stood chatting some distance away on the pontoon.

My leg was heavy in the water as I kicked at something I didn’t want to see. It moved to my waist, squeezing – suffocating. As it travelled up my body, I closed my eyes, not wishing to see the inevitable gush of crimson mixing with sea water – the pain. What seemed like seconds later, I landed on the pontoon like a giant fish. The lager man – standing over me.

‘Bilmey mate, that was a close shave,’ he belched out.

I knew then that he had rescued me from the jaws of some grotesque sea monster, yet to be discovered.

1494 words.