

# Dark Journey

In some ways, Grace thought, it was a blessing that it was so dark. You could block out the fact that the path was bordered by nothingness on one side. You *had* to block out that fact, as much as you could. As long as you kept focused on the steadiness of your footsteps, and remained alert to the turning points, it really wasn't so bad. Shanti was taking the responsibility of leading very seriously and calling out to Lorcan every time he needed to turn. The captain had slowed his pace too, so that he was never very far in front.

Once more, Grace found herself totally absorbed in the rhythm of her movements. She lost track of how far they had come, how high they had climbed. All she knew was that they had to keep going. For however long it took. It was strange making a journey that seemed to have no end point but, in a curious way, it was also a relief.

A noise ahead of her drew her back from her musings.

Lorcan had tripped, she saw, alarmed. He had fallen on the path, thank goodness. But his feet had sent scree tumbling down the mountainside.

"Are you OK?" Grace asked, reaching out a hand to him.

"Yes," he said, gathering himself on his feet. "I don't know what happened there."

"It's my fault," Shanti said. "The path is narrower and more broken up here. I should have said."

"It's OK," Lorcan replied. "No harm done." Grace could see his smile in what little light there was.

"Oh," moaned Shanti. "I can't see the captain. Has he gone on ahead? It's so hard to keep up!" She hurried along the narrow track, practically running to keep sight of the captain.

"Be careful!" Grace cried. "Not so fast!"

But Shanti wouldn't heed the warning. She was determined to catch the captain. As Shanti disappeared around the corner, Grace told Lorcan, "I've got to catch her up, to stop her. Wait here!"

"All right," he agreed, relieved to catch his breath.

Grace pressed on ahead. She hadn't got very far when

she heard a cry, followed by something that sounded very much like crumbling rock. She felt a wave of dread even before she heard Shanti's strangulated cry. "Help!"

"Shanti!" Grace cried, striding ahead.

As she turned the corner, the sight that confronted her confirmed her worst fears. Shanti was suspended over the side of the mountain, a sheer drop beneath her. The path had given way around her and all that was keeping her from the abyss was a precarious-looking shrub. A shrub which, by the looks of things, could uproot itself at any moment.

"Shanti!" Grace cried once more, crouching down and extending her arm. "Take hold of me. I'll pull you up."

Grace had never seen such raw terror as she saw now in Shanti's eyes. "No," she rasped. "Grace, I can't. You're not strong enough."

"Oh yes I am," Grace said, though really she wasn't all that confident. She and Shanti were of a similar weight.

What if Shanti dragged her down rather than Grace pulling her up? Grace had to shut out the thought. She was going to do this. They were both going to be all right. She reached out her hand. "Come on, Shanti," she said. "All you have to do is let go of that plant and I'll catch you."

"I can't!" But as Shanti spoke, the shrub began to move.

The ground was loosening again and, as Shanti closed her eyes and prepared for the worst, Grace reached out and grabbed her arm. "I've got you," she said. "I've got you." Now, all she had to do was pull her up onto the solid patch of path.

But as Grace began to pull, she had the grim realisation that she was *not* strong enough. Now what was she going to do? There was no sign of the captain and there was no way Lorcan could get here without someone leading him. She felt a rising panic but was determined not to transmit it to Shanti.

"What's wrong?" Shanti asked. "I was right, wasn't I? You're not strong enough! We're both going to die!"

Now Grace faced a terrible dilemma. Either let Shanti fall into the void alone or be dragged down with her. She looked down the brutal drop. There was no way either of them could survive such a fall.

Suddenly, Shanti's weight became lighter. Grace wondered if she had managed to summon some unknown

resources deep within herself. Then she saw that another pair of hands were reaching out to hold Shanti. Grace turned and saw a young man crouching beside her on the path. He was dressed in the robes of a shepherd.

“I’ll count to three,” he said. “Then we pull her up, OK?”

Grace nodded. The man smiled at her. It was a smile which instilled complete confidence and calm in her.

“One, two, *three* . . .”

Grace focused all her strength as they pulled Shanti up and onto the path. She lay on the ground, covered in dirt, sobbing. Grace’s own heart was pounding. They had both faced certain death. If it hadn’t been for the shepherd, it would have ended very differently. What a miracle he had been passing at that very moment.

“Thank you,” Grace said, turning to the man.

But he was nowhere to be seen, gone as mysteriously as he had arrived.