

Chapter 21 – Great Escape

“Alright Chris,” Colt said as he unleashed his plan, “You are going to get up on Shane’s shoulders. You reach up and grab the rock and pull yourself up to the ledge.”

Colt had noticed a small ledge about fifteen feet up the wall of the pit. He waited while Chris climbed Shane’s shoulders. “Okay Shane, lift him up,” said Colt.

Shane, currently in a squat position, flexed his muscles and quickly pushed Chris up toward the sky until he heard a loud *kathunk*. Chris’ head met

swiftly and forcefully with the ledge the he was supposed to climb upon. Chris would have fallen backward off of Shane's shoulders but Shane didn't realize that the sound he heard was Chris' head. He continued to push upward pinning Chris against the ledge. Chris let out grunts of pain but Shane did not stop. It took a moment until Colt realized what was happening.

"Shane, stop," said Colt. "Let him down."

"Why?" Shane asked, suddenly looking like a stereotypical rugby playing moron. "Is he having trouble?"

"Dude," said Colt with a small laugh, "that was his head that hit the rock. You've probably given him a concussion."

"Sorry mate," said Shane.

As Shane squatted back to where he started, Colt could see the dizzy look in Chris' eyes. He was relieved to see that Chris was still conscious but a little worried that the knock on the head may hinder Chris' ability to get out of the hole they were in.

“Colt, what are we trying to do?” questioned Shane. “Are you really thinking that we can all climb forty feet out of this hole?”

“No!” said Colt, with certainty, “we only need to climb thirty five feet.”

Shane was not laughing. “I don’t think Chris is going to be able to climb right now,” he said.

“I am getting out of here and you are helping me. We can do this.” Colt took a deep breath, sighed hard and then proceeded to explain, “Listen, Shane, I’m going to climb on your shoulders. Then, be ready. I’m not tall enough to touch the rock. I’m going to have to jump. I need you to hold strong so I can get enough air under me.”

“Whoa, you are going to jump off my shoulders?” Shane said, “Okay, I guess.”

“Listen, if I can grab that rock I know I can pull myself up. I have been training for months for an event just like this. That will put me about fifteen feet up. Add my height onto that and I’m less than

ten feet from the top. I've done some rock climbing. I've got to try it."

"OK, so let's just say you get out of here," said Shane, "what about us?"

"I promise; I'll come back for you with rope. You climb up. Then we can send the rope back down, Chris can tie it around himself and we will pull him up."

Shane moaned and groaned but ultimately knew it was no good to fight. If Colt managed to escape there was at least a chance of his own survival. If they spent time fighting, Shane knew they were all sure to die in the hole.

"Okay," said Shane, "climb up."

With that, Colt quickly shimmied up Shane's back and stood on his shoulders. For an athlete like Colt that part was easy. Colt's shorter stature was going to make it hard to reach the rock handhold above but he was counting on his ab strength and flexibility to help him get to the top of the hole.

"Are you ready, Shane?"

“No, but go ahead,” Shane replied, with a grimace on his face.

Colt counted, “One, two, three...” and jumped toward the handhold. Shane, whose back was against the wall of the cavern, was sent flying forward. He landed with a splat, on his belly in the little bit of water that was left in the rerouted underground river.

Colt managed to leap high enough to get his fingers on the rock handhold. Holding on with one hand, Colt gnashed his teeth together and focused on getting his other hand up to the rock. He latched onto the rock, now holding on with one hand cupped over the other – a perfect position given that he was going to need to pray in order to make this work. Colt had thought this through. He leaned back and swung his feet forward so that they could be used as another point of contact with the wall. Using his feet and knees against the dirt wall, he scurried his lower body upwards like a beetle in the dirt. While still on the ground Colt had noticed a tree root that had pushed its way through the dirt

and then looped back into the soil. That was his next pursuit.

After finding a foothold that appeared to be kicked into the side of the cavern, Colt was feeling a little more comfortable with his position. He called down to his new friends, "I've got this!"

Colt knew exactly what he had to do. He pushed up with his feet while at the same time flexing all of his core muscles. His body flew through the air like a trapeze artist; his two arms outstretched waiting to connect with the root above him. He performed one very precise chin-up and put his feet on top of the rock he had originally held. And there he would stand with his friends cheering below. Colt stood with his arms wrapped through the root.

"What's up?" asked Shane. "Why are you stopping?"

Colt muttered a couple words that he probably shouldn't have said and Shane took the hint. Five minutes passed, then ten. After fifteen minutes Shane called up, "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine,” Colt called back. He had been studying the wall while catching his breath. “I’m just charting my course.” Like a Rocky Mountain climber looking up the face of Mount Robson, Colt wanted to be certain he was going to take the safest route up the sheer cliff.

“You can do this, mate,” Shane called up. Colt took notice of Shane’s confident voice behind his strong accent.

With that nudge of encouragement, Colt took a sharp stone out of his pocket. He had thought ahead. Colt had picked up the stone before mounting Shane’s shoulders. The stone was just smaller than his clenched fist and pointed just enough to dig into the dirt wall. He prayed quietly, took a deep breath and began his climb. He needed to scale about eight feet to reach the top of the hole.

As he dug the stone into the wall he also placed his feet in small divots already in the wall. Some of these divots were made by tree roots poking through or caused by erosion, while some divots

seemed to be dug at a perfect depth for Colt's foot. Small steps and quick reaches propelled Colt deliberately up the wall. His friends below watched with trepidation, hoping that Colt could make it to the top but secretly fearing he would come crashing back to ground below. Colt took three more steps upward but on the fourth his right foot slipped as the dirt and rock crumbled. He was left hanging onto his stone with his feet dangling.

Shane and Chris gasped but Colt did not struggle. His training on the boat gave him confidence that he could complete his mission. He knew that if he jerked too much he would pull the stone out of the wall and crash to the bottom of the hole. Moving only his eyes he spotted another root just inches above his head. Colt threw his left arm into the air and pulled his legs upward. As he did, the stone in his right hand pulled loose from the wall. The next split second felt like several minutes.

Colt blinked and when his eyes opened he had a hold of the root and had found himself another foothold, with his eyebrows even with the top of the

wall. With nothing left to do but pull himself out of the hole Colt grinned as the boys below hooted and hollered with excitement.

He pulled himself to his feet and called back down the hole, "I'll be back! I promise."

Colt walked a hundred metres from the top of the hole and stopped. He slowly spun three hundred sixty degrees and located three large boulders that created a triangle around the foibe he had just escaped so that he could find his way back. He then found the skyline of Rijeka. He began to walk in the direction of the tall buildings, across the limestone wasteland that lay in front of him when out of nowhere a pick-up truck stopped beside Colt.

"Hellllloooo," said the dark skinned man in a jovial tone. "How are yooouuu?" He held his words to end each sentence.

"I've had better days," said Colt honestly.

“Ohhh,” said the man, “that’s too baaad. Can I give you a ride?” The man’s chubby cheeks and constant smile made Colt feel good, even in his difficult situation.

“Are you going into Rijeka?” Colt inquired. “I could really use a ride. My friends are in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble are they innnn?” said the man.

“Sir, what’s your name?” asked Colt. “And how did you come to be driving by at just the right time?”

“Oh, my friend, my name is Shyrod,” said the man with a huge smile. “I am the driver for Been There Done That Tours. I have just dropped the tour group off to go explore a couple of the foibe and am in need of some parts for my truuuuck so I am going to the cityyy.”

“What’s the foibe?” questioned Colt. He felt comfortable that Shyrod could actually help and was not just a crazy wanderer. Shyrod’s cheerful mannerisms and the way he held his words made Colt giggle a little.

“The foibe is a series of large sinkholes...”
Shyrod started to explain the foibe to Colt who realized he was talking about the pit he had just left.

“Wait, stop,” said Colt. “You have just sent a tour group down into the foibe? Does that mean you have spelunking equipment? Ropes and harnesses and stuff?” Colt suddenly felt a jolt of excitement. He may not have to go all the way to the city for help after all.

“Yesss,” said Shyrod. “I have the ropes and the harnesses.”

“Oh my gosh,” said Colt. “I have two friends who are stuck at the bottom of that foibe, right over there.” Colt pointed at the hole he had just climbed out of. “Could you help me?”

“Of courrrrsse,” said Shyrod.

He opened up the back of his pick-up truck and leaned over the tailgate. He had to stand on his toes so that he could lift his round belly above the tailgate’s edge. He was dressed in sandals, board

shorts and a t-shirt and although he looked more like an overweight beach bum than a bodybuilder, Colt felt like Shyrod was exactly the type of guy that could help his friends out of the hole.

Shyrod had done this many times before while helping the tour groups that he drove around. In no time at all he had the ropes and harnesses ready to send down to Shane and Chris. He tied one end of the ropes around a nearby tree as the safety rope and the other to the bumper of his truck. Colt threw the harnesses down the hole and instructed the boys to put them on. Once the two boys in the hole were ready, Shyrod slowly put his foot on the gas and the truck rolled forward, lifting the boys out of the hole with ease.

The boys thanked Shyrod for his help as they explained to him how they came to be in the hole. Although they lied and told a story about their climbing equipment malfunctioning, knowing that telling the true story might bring too much attention to Colt's mission. He offered them a ride into the city which they graciously accepted.

“I’m not sure how we could possibly repay you for the help that you have given us,” Colt said to Shyrod as they drove into the city. “I would have had to walk all this way and then back again with ropes.”

“Hey, no worries my friend,” said Shyrod. “You buy me a kebob and we call it even. I know a good place.”

After a brief stop to buy Shyrod a kebab, the truck driver dropped Colt, Shane and Chris off at the dock where Ariel’s Crush still sat moored.

“Bye!” said Chris.

“See ya, mate,” said Shane.

“Man,” said Colt, “I hope we run into you again someday.”

“I knoooww, you just never know where I will beeee,” said Shyrod.

Shyrod drove off and the boys ran up the gang plank onto the ship. Colt found it strangely quiet as

he was not used to getting onto the ship without Falcone in his face.

Colt continued further onto the ship with his friends and finally found Ms. McLennan, Kate and Richard in the dining hall. Ms. McLennan jumped up and hugged Colt tightly.

“Oh Colt, thank goodness you’re safe!” she called out.

“I’ve got important information,” said Colt, not realizing the relief the others were feeling in knowing he was alive.

Without easing up on her hug, Ms. McLennan responded, “We have some important news for you too. We think Falcone is in trouble.”