

# **I Survived**

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I rested my head against the rounded window of the airplane and stared outside at the airport. The hazy sun was slightly obscured by shreds of gray clouds, casting a soft light on the airport. I turned away from the window and slumped back against the uncomfortable seat, watching other passengers as they moved down the aisle and crammed their luggage into the overhead compartments. My younger brother, Alex, perched in the seat next to mine, fiddling with the built-in features of the plane. I shifted in my seat, trying to make myself at least somewhat comfortable. I tugged my oversized sweater over my knees, shivering. It was freezing inside the plane.

The stewardesses glided up and down the aisle, offering fake smiles to the passengers as they settled down in their seats. The rough male voice of the captain crackled over the intercom: "Attention, ladies and gentlemen, we are preparing for takeoff. Please switch off all electrical devices. Thank you."

I jammed my phone into the pocket of my skinny jeans and glanced out the window as the plane positioned itself on the runway. "Emily, buckle your seat belt," my mother said sharply. She and my father were sitting in the seats next to us across the aisle. I obediently clicked the seat belt into place and tightened it, then glanced out the window as the plane began to move down the runway. The deafening roar of the engine grew louder as the plane gained speed and left the ground, rising above the airport.

I slumped back in my seat and took out a tattered library book, flipping through the wrinkled yellow pages. As I tried to read, my thoughts wandered, and I couldn't pay attention to the story. The excitement of traveling to Brazil for summer vacation clouded my ability to focus on the

book. It had been my idea for my family and I to visit Brazil for a couple of weeks during summer break. It would be so different from our boring, routinely life in California, and I couldn't wait.

I closed the book and tucked it away, closing my eyes as I sank back against the hard, uncomfortable seat. Eventually I succumbed to fatigue, my consciousness ebbing away as I fell into a light, dreamless sleep.

Several hours later, an abrupt noise snapped me out of my slumber. *Bang!* Confused, I struggled to sit up in my seat, but the pressure of the seat belt limited any movement. I ripped off the belt and stared around in bewilderment. There was a chorus of anxious muttering from the other passengers, who were craning their necks to stare out the windows with horror and fear across their faces. I pressed my face against the window next to me and a strangled gasping noise escaped my throat upon seeing the issue. Trails of wispy black smoke obscured my vision, but I could see that the engine was enveloped in a haze of thick smoke. Over the panicked sounds of the other passengers, the engine was making a droning, guttural noise. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew something about the plane was horribly wrong.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, but nobody seemed to know the answer to my question. My dad was looking frantically out the window, and my mom was praying, muttering under her breath.

The grim voice of the captain spoke over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are experiencing a serious issue with the engine, and we are going to make an emergency landing. Please fasten your seatbelts."

The plane began to descend at an improbable angle, losing altitude rapidly. Alex, my brother, clutched desperately to my arm, his eyes squeezed shut. The beverage cart flew by and crashed against the rear end of the plane. I fumbled with my seatbelt frantically, but it was jammed between the seats. Oxygen masks dropped from above, but I hadn't bothered to pay attention to pre-flight instructions and I had no idea what to do with them. I knew I was going to die.

The plane slammed into the ground, the impact jarring my bones. I was flung against the seat in front of me, ripping open the flesh on my forehead. A piece of metal raked across my forearm, and I cried out in pain

as the sharp edge tore a deep, jagged cut across my skin. The deafening screech of the plane roared in my ears as it skidded to a stop on the ground. I could hear my heart pounding unevenly, and my breath coming out in quick, strangled gasps. My head throbbed as I faded in and out of consciousness. I knew I was alive, but barely.

"Emily?" At the sound of my brother's voice, my eyes snapped open.

"Alex?" I whispered, sitting upright in my seat. His dark brown eyes watched me anxiously as I fumbled to unbuckle my seatbelt with my bloodstained hands. There was a livid cut across the side of his rounded face, but otherwise he looked okay. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"I don't know," he replied, but his voice shook with uncertainty. "I hurt my leg." I recoiled in horror at the deep, bloody gash in his calf, close to his knee. His basketball shorts were stained with blood. "Is your forehead okay?" he asked.

I reached up with an unsteady hand to touch the wound on my forehead, my fingers probing the long, jagged cut above my eyebrow. I wiped away the blood that was dripping into my eyes with the sleeve of my torn sweater. "Yeah, I'm fine," I told him. "Are Mom and Dad okay?" They had to be alive. If Alex and I had survived, then they had to be okay, too.

Alex grimaced as he reached across the aisle and gently shook my mother's shoulder. There was a deep gash along her hairline, and blood dribbled out of her open mouth. "She's not waking up," Alex whispered, and I could hear the suppressed panic in his hushed voice.

"Are you sure?" I demanded.

Alex grabbed her shoulder and shook her roughly. Her body remained motionless. "Mom?" he said softly.

She didn't respond.

Panic welled up inside me, curdling the blood in my veins. "Is her heart beating?" I said desperately.

Alex pressed his ear against her chest and listened. "No," he whispered.

I flung myself out of my seat, grimacing in pain, and shook my father's shoulder. He didn't move either. My mom and dad's bodies slumped motionless in their seats. Blood trickled down my father's face from a wound on his forehead, staining his light brown hair red.

"Are they . . . ?" Alex swallowed and forced the word out. "Are they dead?"

I didn't respond to his question, but we both knew the unspoken answer.

Suddenly, Alex grasped my hand, his eyes stretched wide with fear. The acrid smell of smoke burned my nose, and I glanced up to see that the entire rear end of the plane was engulfed in orange flames. The heat seared my skin, and the stench of burning flesh stung my nostrils. I stared at the fire for a split second as it consumed the plane. "Run!" I gasped.

I grabbed Alex's hand and started to run, but he didn't move. His wide eyes were pinned on our parent's lifeless bodies. "Alex!" I screamed. "We have to go!"

He stood there motionlessly, staring at my mother and father slumped in the airplane seat. "We can't leave Mom and Dad," he said.

I grabbed both of his hands and forced him to look into my eyes. "We can't save Mom and Dad, okay? They're . . . they're already dead." My voice cracked in the middle of the sentence and I felt tears pushing against my eyelids.

Alex stared at me, then nodded once. "Okay."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, as the flames roared and crackled closer and closer. "Let's go."

I sprinted down the aisle, dragging him behind me. The smoke enveloped us, obscuring my vision. My eyes stung and my throat burned as my body convulsed with hacking coughs. The heat of the fire seared my back. Unable to see anything, my foot slammed against the edge of a seat and I tripped, crashing to the ground.

"Get up!" Alex screamed, forcing me to my feet. I regained my balance and we kept running, my breaths coming out in strained gasps as we sprinted down the aisle.

"Where the hell is the emergency door?" I demanded, grasping my way through the haze of smoke.

"Here!" Alex responded, dragging me blindly toward a glimmer of daylight. We scrambled out of the door and tumbled down the inflatable slide, crashing to the ground at the bottom.

I sprawled on the ground, dry leaves pressing against my cheek as I gasped for air. My lungs burned and the jagged gash on my forehead seared

with pain. I wiped the blood away with my sleeve as it dripped into my eyes.

"You okay?" I whispered to Alex, sitting up.

He grimaced in pain as he shifted his leg forward to inspect the gash on his calf. Blood pulsed out of the wound, splattering the dead leaves on the ground. "I don't know," he replied.

I tried to remember everything I'd ever learned from books and movies about what to do in a situation like this. I tore off a strip of fabric from my sweatshirt and wrapped it around his calf, pressing the fabric against the wound. Alex grimaced in pain as I secured the fabric into place. "It'll stop the bleeding," I explained.

The roar of the flames intensified as the entire plane was enveloped in fire and smoke. Alex rose to his feet, his eyes wide as he stared at the burning plane.

"What's wrong?" I demanded, getting up.

"The plane is about to explode," he said. "We have to go. Now!"

I grabbed his hand as we sprinted through the forest, away from the plane. Vines and leaves raked across my face as we ran blindly through the forest. My shoes sunk into the damp ground with every step as I stumbled over tree roots.

Suddenly, there was a deafening roar as the plane exploded behind us. Shards of flaming metal pelted down from the sky. A piece of metal lodged itself into my forearm, and I cried out in pain as I ripped it out of my skin. "Keep running!" Alex screamed, dragging me along.

Shards of debris rained down all around us as we sprinted through the forest. As we scrambled over a fallen tree trunk, something rained down from the sky and hit the ground in front of us with a thud. It wasn't a piece of metal. "What is that?" Alex demanded.

I stepped forward to get a closer inspection of the object, then recoiled in horror. It was an arm, the fingers crooked and bent, the flesh torn and bloody. I stared at it in horror until Alex grabbed my arm and forced me to keep running.

We kept running until we were both exhausted, sweaty, and out of breath. My sweatshirt was tattered and ripped, and warm, sticky blood coated my face. Alex winced and reach down to probe the gash on his leg. The piece of cloth that I had wrapped around his wound was soaked with

blood. I felt warm, sticky blood trickling down my face, but I could barely feel the pain from the cut on my forehead due to the adrenaline rush.

"You okay?" I asked Alex, looking anxiously at the wound on his leg.

Alex grunted and bent down to look more closely at it, his face contorted with pain. "What if it gets infected or something?" he said anxiously. The ragged piece of cloth was completely soaked with blood.

I gingerly unraveled the cloth around his leg and tossed it away. I ripped off a piece of my sweatshirt and tied it around the wound securely. Alex grimaced with pain. When I had secured the strip of cloth into place, I straightened up and wiped the blood on my jeans.

"Is your forehead okay?" Alex said, looking anxiously at the gash on my forehead.

I touched the wound gently. It was no longer bleeding, but it still stung with a sharp pain. "I think it's fine," I replied.

With no little difficulty, Alex lowered himself to the ground in a sitting position, resting his back against a tree trunk. "So what are we going to do now?" he said.

"We need to get help," I said. "We're both injured pretty badly, especially you." I hesitated, thinking. It was difficult to form a coherent idea through the stinging pain of my forehead. "Maybe we could call 911."

Alex frowned. "But we don't have a phone."

I sighed and nodded in disappointment. "You're right."

Alex slumped back against the tree trunk, lost in thought. "Wait a second," he said suddenly, sitting straight up, hope flaring in his dark, bloodshot eyes. "Weren't you using your phone on the plane?"

"Yeah, I was!" I reached into the pocket of my torn, stained skinny jeans and pulled out my iPhone. Alex scrambled to his feet and peered over my shoulder as I wiped the dirt off the surface of the phone. Hope and excitement lit up our faces. The screen was cracked and the edges were dented, but when I pressed the power button, the phone worked. The screen glowed to life.

"It still works!" I exclaimed, overjoyed. I unlocked the phone and dialed 911, my fingers fumbling across the screen. I pressed the phone to my ear and waited with baited breath. But instead of hearing the ringing, the only sound that came through were three short beeps.

"What the hell?" I said, jabbing at the screen.

"The call didn't go through," Alex said softly. "The signal out here isn't strong enough. Try it again."

I frantically dialed 911 again and pressed the phone to my ear, praying to hear the sound of the phone ringing on the other end. But again, the only sound I heard were three high-pitched beeps. We tried calling several more times, but none of the calls went through. In the midst of my frustration, I threw the phone on the ground. It landed with a thump among the dry leaves.

Alex slumped against a tree, burying his grimy face in his hands. I sighed and picked up the phone, turning it over and over between my hands, wondering what to do. ~~Images of my parents' lifeless bodies slumped in their seats, blood trickling from their mouths, eyes permanently shut, kept invading my thoughts. Tears welled in my eyes and streaked my cheeks as the reality of the situation sunk in. My parents were dead. All I had now was my brother, and I might lose him too if we didn't find help in time.~~

Suddenly, Alex reached forward and grabbed my arm, his brown eyes wide with excitement. "I have an idea," he said eagerly, snatching the phone out of my hands.

Hope flared up inside, and I peered over his shoulder as he unlocked the phone and opened the text messaging app. "What are you doing?" I said, bewildered.

Alex turned to look at me, his face grubby and smeared with dirt and blood, but his eyes glittering with pride and enthusiasm. "It's possible to text 911," he said breathlessly.

"It is?"

"Texting requires less signal than calling," he explained.

"Are you sure?" I said, trying not to get my hopes up.

"Positive," he replied.

I took the phone from him and hastily typed a message to 911, then read it aloud to him. "Please help! Our flight from San Francisco to Rio has crashed in the jungle. Please send help ASAP."

"That's good," Alex said tersely. I tapped the send button, praying that the message would go through. It took a while to deliver, but the message finally sent.

I clutched the phone in my hand, waiting anxiously for a reply. Seconds dragged by, turning into minutes. Alex fiddled with the blood-soaked bandage around his leg, and I idly combed through my matted hair with my fingers. As we waited for the reply, my mind wandered and the reality of the situation finally sunk in. My brother and I were stuck in the middle of a forest with severe injuries and a slim chance of surviving. And, even if we did make it out alive, what would happen to us then? Neither of our lives would ever go back to the way they had been before the crash. Our parents were dead. I remembered their lifeless bodies slumped in the seat, blood trickling from their mouths. Our family had been torn apart. I was an orphan now. Tears welled up in my eyes and streaked my cheeks, but I blinked and hastily wiped them away with my shirtsleeve.

I heard a soft sniffle nearby, and I turned to see Alex propped up against the tree in a sitting position, his bandaged leg in front of him, his face buried in his arms. I could see his shoulders shaking with each sob.

Suddenly, the phone vibrated and a message appeared on the screen. "Alex!" I said excitedly. "I got the reply!"

He scrambled to his feet and peered over my shoulder as I read the message aloud. "Help is on the way. Please remain calm. Start a smoky fire so we can find you."

"Start a smoky fire . . ." Alex repeated. He looked at me in bewilderment. "How are we going to do that?"

"I think I have an idea," I said. "Follow me."

He trailed after me as I headed back to the wreckage of the plane. Scraps of burning metal littered the ground. "Make a pile of sticks and branches," I instructed Alex. He obediently gathered pieces of wood from the ground and began raking them into a pile.

While he did so, I bent down and picked up a small tree branch. Carefully, I held it over one of the burning pieces of metal. The flames reached up and engulfed the end of my stick. Quickly, I brought my flaming branch over to the large pile of wood that Alex had made. I added the burning branch to the pile, and the entire thing caught on fire, sending clouds of smoke up into the sky.

I coughed and stepped away from the fire, covering my nose and mouth with my sweatshirt to avoid breathing in the acrid smoke. Alex and I slouched against a tree about twenty feet away from the fire, so the



smoke wouldn't bother us. As I rested against the trunk, the sharp wood pressing into my back, anxiety and fear twisted my stomach. Minutes dragged by. I kept glancing up at the sky, looking for a helicopter and straining my ears to hear the whir of propellers.

We waited and waited. I twisted a strand of hair around my finger and attempted to clean out the dirt beneath my broken, grubby fingernails. I watched a spider crawl along the tree trunk, its hairy brown body blending in with the bark. I swatted at the swarm of mosquitoes that buzzed around me, glancing up at the sky for any sign of the helicopter. The sun hung low in the sky. I guessed that it was about five in the afternoon. What time had we left the airport? I wondered. A vague memory of our house in California streaked comet-like across the unfocused lens of my mind. It was hard to believe that only a few hours ago, my family and I had boarded a plane to Brazil, unaware that it would crash.

I glanced over at my brother, who was resting against the tree next to mine. His face was buried in his grimy hands, his shoulders hunched. "You okay?" I asked him gently, scooting closer to him.

He looked up at me, his auburn hair matted, his face coated in a layer of dirt. His clothes were torn and bloodstained, and flies buzzed around his wounds. He looked more dead than alive.

"I can't believe Mom and Dad are gone," he said softly.

"I know," I said. "Me neither."

We waited in silence for several minutes. When I noticed the fire was beginning to die down, I gathered more wood and added it to the burning pile, then rested against a tree as I kept a constant lookout for the helicopter.

After about two hours, I began to worry. Fear and anxiety twisted my stomach into knots. Where was the helicopter? It should have been here by now. What if they couldn't find us? I glanced at the fire, which was sending clouds of billowing smoke through the treetops and into the sky. Would they see the smoke?

Suddenly, Alex sat bolt upright and craned his neck to stare up at the sky. "Do you hear that?" he demanded.

"What?"

"That whirring sound," Alex said. "It sounds like a helicopter."

I scrambled to my feet and peered up through the treetops, searching the sky for a helicopter. "There it is!" Alex shouted, pointing at a moving black dot in the sky that was circling above us.

I hopped up and down, flailing my arms and screaming, "Over here!" Alex gathered a pile of branches and flung them into the fire, making it burn more brightly. We jumped up and down, shrieking at the top of our lungs, until my throat burned and it hurt for me to scream.

The helicopter headed closer, hovering over us. A metal basket attached to a wire was lowered down from the helicopter. When it reached the ground, Alex and I clambered into it, overcome with joy and relief. The basket lifted us up into the helicopter, and strong hands grasped our arms and pulled us inside.

A young man wearing an orange vest helped us into the helicopter. "You okay?" he asked over the roar of the blades.

I nodded. I was so overcome with happiness and relief that I could barely talk.

As we settled into the seats of the helicopter, I glanced out the window, at the lush forest scattered with pieces of burning metal. I could see the wreckage of the plane, engulfed in smoke and flames, and I imagined the hundreds of human bodies inside the plane that had turned into ashes, and among them my parents' empty, lifeless bodies. Despite so many people dying, my brother and I had miraculously made it out alive. We were okay. We were safe now. Tears trickled down my cheeks, and whether they were tears of joy or sadness I did not know.

As the helicopter rose higher in the air, I kept my eyes pinned on the jungle beneath us, plumes of smoke engulfing the treetops. As I wiped the tears off my face with the back of my hand, I knew only one thing for sure: My life would never be the same again.