

WHEN THE  
WORST  
HAPPENS

EXTRAORDINARY  
STORIES OF  
SURVIVAL

TANYA LLOYD KYI  
ART BY DAVID PARKINS



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# INTRODUCTION

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# THE BIG “WHAT IF?”

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Where are you sitting as you read these words? Probably, you're in a warm and comfortable spot, breathing plentiful air. Maybe you have a drink or a snack nearby.

What if you didn't?





***JULIANE KOEPCKE, AGE 17, PERU***

What if one minute you were safely buckled into your airplane seat, and the next minute your chair was free-falling through the sky as the jungle trees grew terrifyingly closer, sharper, and harder?



***BALA NONA, AGE 12, TORRES STRAIT  
(body of water between Australia and New Guinea)***

What if you and your family were on your way to a birthday party when your boat capsized in the ocean?



***JIMMY SANCHEZ, AGE 19, CHILE***

What if your workplace was a mine 212 stories below the ground? What if one day the mountain exploded around you, trapping you in darkness?



***PUNNY EBIERBING, AGE 8, ICE FLOE,  
Arctic Ocean off the coast of Greenland***

What if your mother and father were part of an expedition to find the North Pole? What if one day your ship floated away and left you stranded and starving on a floating chunk of ice?



In the coming pages, you'll find these four stories and many others—stories about people grappling with all sorts of extreme environments. In some of these places, people did mind-boggling things to survive. They ate bugs, drank from puddles, fought off hungry predators, performed emergency surgery, wrapped themselves in seaweed, and crawled down a mountain with a broken leg. They scratched their way out of piles of rubble, staggered through deserts, and faced the emptiness of space. But in other places, people lost hope. They sat and waited for death.

So what makes the difference between life and death? A strange mix of mental strategies, survival skills, and sheer luck allows some people to find their way back to civilization, even when it seems impossible.

What are the secrets to their success?

And there's one other question, of course . . .

What would *you* do to survive?

## THE KEY TO SURVIVAL

Watch for these icons throughout the book. They mark places where people use great survival strategies . . . and places where they go astray. A red icon means someone is doing the opposite of what experts recommend.

### FIND FRIENDS



The key to many emergency situations is finding people who can help you get home—they might be professional rescuers or local inhabitants.



### ACT!



To avoid panic and stay focused, get both your brain and body in gear. You need to make plans and take action. Sometimes it doesn't even matter *what* you do. As long as you are doing something, you can keep yourself alert, calm, and hopeful.



## ***GO BACK TO BASICS***



What do I have, what can I find, and how long will it last? To survive, you need to stay warm and dry. You need air, water, food, and rest. The sooner you find these things, the better.



## ***USE YOUR KNOW-HOW***



If I eat it, will I die? Understanding the dangers and the resources of your environment is a major advantage. A few basic skills, like how to light a fire or use a compass, can also make a huge difference.



## ***KEEP YOUR COOL***



Survival situations are seriously stressful. If you can turn fear or anger into motivation, you might find the strength to persevere. Stay confident and think positively.



## ***GET ZEN***



Finding a way to keep your mind focused is critical. Some people pray, chant, or repeat words and patterns to themselves. Others breathe rhythmically or meditate. These activities tell your mind that you're in control and things are going to be okay.



## ***PLAY NICE***



If you're stranded with other people, communication and empathy are key. Crises are solved more quickly when groups work together; if people can't get along, things get more dangerous for everyone. Plus, caring for others can turn you from a victim into a rescuer. It can give you a feeling of purpose and increase your motivation to survive.



Many of the people in the following chapters used these strategies well. Others went astray—and paid a terrible price!

In the first chapter, you'll learn about how our bodies and minds react to emergencies. Sometimes, people take immediate action and handle danger as if they were professional stunt artists. Other times, they act more like petrified animals! Our brains are wired in fascinating ways.

In Chapter 2, there are stories of survivors who faced the most extreme environments on—and off—the planet. You'll read about the strange things people do to meet their basic human needs, and how they react when water's not available at the twist of a tap and food doesn't appear with the pull of a refrigerator handle.

Chapter 3 is all about the emotional challenges people face when they're torn from their cozy lives and dropped into unfamiliar and frightening places. Some have to dig for the inner strength to face these situations alone; others have to find ways to work with (or around) difficult companions.

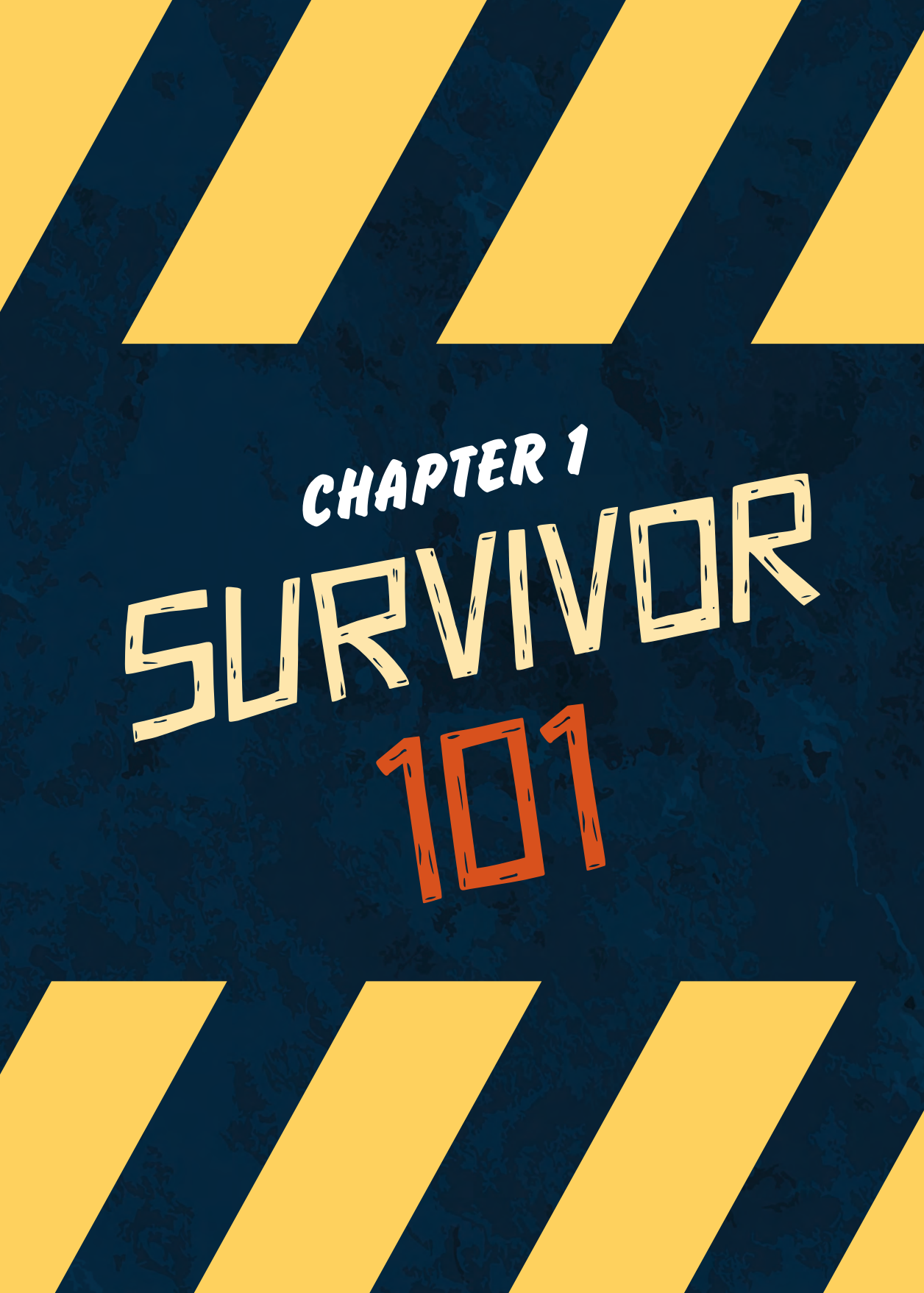
In Chapter 4, tough situations get even tougher. Sharks, anyone? Piranhas? Blizzards? Spacesuit malfunctions? Or maybe you'd like an open wound with your survival scenario? A little fear can keep people alert and motivated, but too much can send them into mental meltdown. In these situations, people have to learn how to control their racing hearts and swirling thoughts.

Finally, Chapter 5 explores the experiences people have if and when they actually manage to return to real life. Going home is often not the end of a survivor's troubles—sometimes, it's just the beginning.

But you don't have to read this book chapter by chapter. If you want to, you can jump around all over the place! There are four major survival tales told in these pages—Juliane's, Bala's, Jimmy's, and Punny's. When one part of a story ends, you can skip ahead to that story's installment in the next chapter to find out what happens next.

If you want, you can even read the final chapter first. You'd miss all the maggot-infested, hallucination-inducing, lion-evading fun. But you would find out once and for all . . . what happens when people survive the unsurvivable.





CHAPTER 1  
SURVIVOR  
101

A squirrel scampers halfway across a busy road. Then, as headlights bear down, the animal freezes. It can't go backward. It can't go forward. It simply stares, wide-eyed, at approaching death.

You'd think, with our bigger brains, we could deal with danger better than a rodent. But it turns out that squirrels and humans have quite a bit in common when it comes to handling crises.

## FIGHT OR FLIGHT OR FREEZE

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***IN THE LATE 1800s***, a scientist named Walter Bradford Cannon was studying digestion using newly developed x-ray technology. He kept having to pause his observations when people's stomachs stopped moving for a while, then restarted. Eventually, he noticed that these stops and starts happened whenever there was a loud noise nearby, or a surprising movement.

But why would sudden noises affect the stomach?

By 1906, Walter had moved on to the study of nerves, looking for a way to explain this startle response. He began investigating a specialized set of nerves called the sympathetic nervous system, which seemed to "activate" the body and get it ready to deal with stressful situations. In the 1930s, Walter coined the phrase "fight or flight response."



Recently, some scientists have renamed this the “fight or flight or freeze response.” It describes the way our bodies are wired to deal with emergencies. If you’re crossing the road, just like that squirrel, and headlights swerve toward you, here’s what happens beneath your skin:

*Your heart speeds up, pumping more blood to your muscles so you can move fast if necessary.*

*Systems like digestion and salivation slow down or stop, so all your body’s resources can be sent to your muscles and your brain.*

*Your brain develops extreme focus—tunnel vision and a type of tunnel hearing.*

*Extra fat and sugar flow into your bloodstream, for a quick burst of energy.*

*Blood-clotting chemicals are released, and some blood vessels constrict, so you won’t bleed as quickly.*

**TO MIN, JULIA, AND MATTHEW, WHO WOULD MAKE  
ANY DESERT ISLAND ENTERTAINING —TLK**

**FOR SUE AND ROB, WHO RESCUED US AGAIN ON  
CHRISTMAS DAY. FIND FRIENDS! —DP**

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