

# THE INTREPID EXPLORERS

## THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE **STOLEN SULING**



Christelle Delli & Josee Delli

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## **THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE**

# **STOLEN SULING**

**Book 1**

**Written by  
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If you're caught trying to steal this book, don't be surprised if the Intrepid Explorers show up at your door to solve that mystery.

Adventure awaits—but only the legal kind!

# Dedication

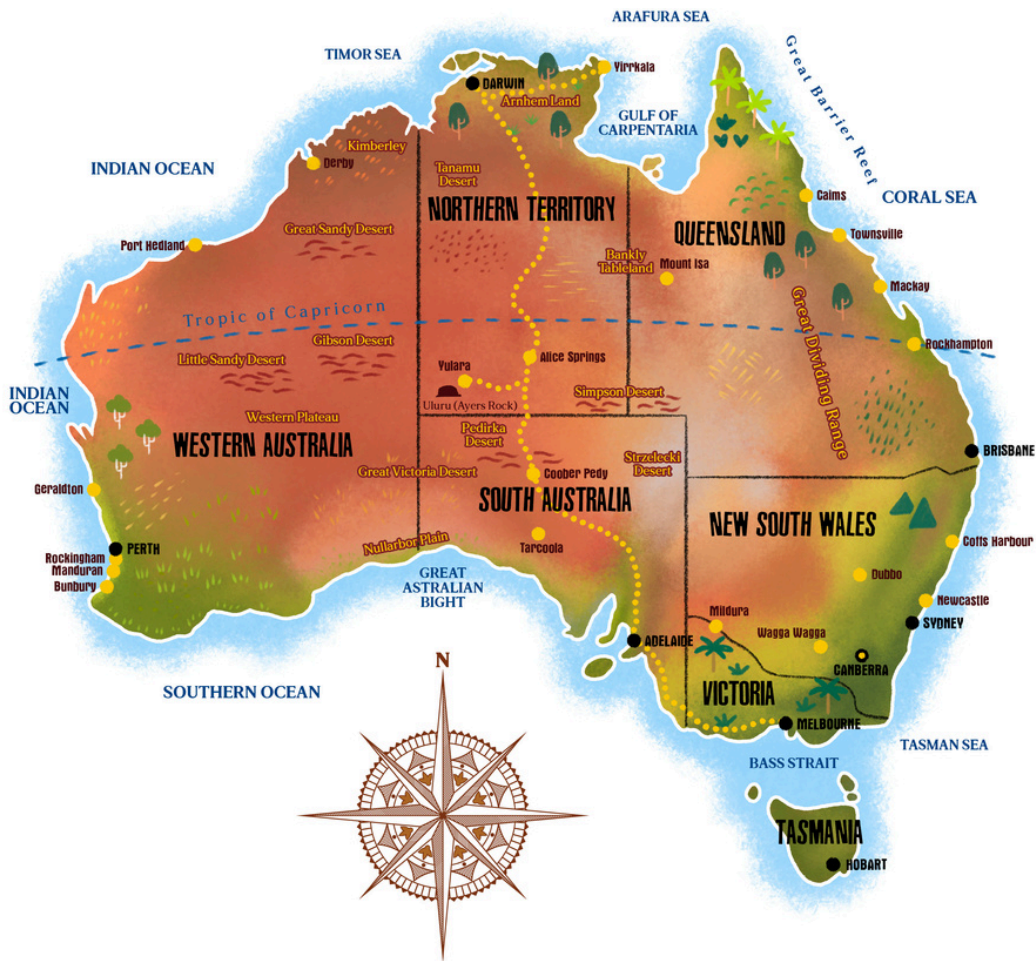
Thank you to my toddlers, Archie and Lucia, for inspiring this book and series.

And thank you for teaching us how to write in chaos.

Thank you Dan, my partner, for not only supporting us but also enduring our endless random questions and helping us brainstorm ideas—even when they made zero sense.

This is also for all the mums who think they can't chase their dreams because of the chaos—it turns out you can, even though it takes longer.

And to all the kids: never stop dreaming, never stop exploring.



## PROLOGUE

A powerful, guttural growl rose from the thick bushes twenty metres away from him. The man jolted and cast a terrified glance toward the bush. There, lurking in the darkness, two metallic yellow eyes fixed their gaze on their prey. The slightly open jaws of the Jurassic reptile revealed its sharp teeth.

The man's heart raced. He inserted the credit card as fast as he could into the lock and slid it once.

Nothing.

He turned around and realised that the reptile had moved closer. Its entire head now protruded from the bush.

Focus, the man thought.

His gloved hands trembled, and sweat dripped under the visor of his black cap.

He slid the card a second time.

The door remained closed.

The terrifying reptile was now only ten metres away. It was crawling slowly, its legs bent and its belly dragging on the ground. Its eyes were fixed on the individual.

On the third attempt, the man heard a small click. He grabbed the handle and pushed the door open quickly. His informant was right! The archaeologist hadn't locked the door to his office with his key. He'd just slammed it shut behind him to lock it.

Relieved, the intruder closed the door. He stepped into the dimly lit room and turned on his torch. Its beam circled the small room before stopping at the safe in the corner.

Without wasting time, he inserted the end of his crowbar between the door and the wall of the safe. When his tool reached the latch, he pressed with all his might to lever it. A sharp sound revealed he had managed to dislodge it. The safe was now open, and the object he was after was laying there.

The man seized the artefact and looked at it. For the following seconds, he was unable to divert his gaze from its mysterious symbols. It was almost as if the mystical instrument was summoning him.

Shaking himself, the man wrapped the object in a blanket, firmly grasped his crowbar, and opened the door cautiously.

The saltwater crocodile had disappeared.

Still on guard, the intruder left the office. A gentle breeze brushed his face. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach below was barely audible.

He closed the door of the modular building behind him. His slender silhouette quickly and silently disappeared into the forest.



# CHAPTER 1

## May the Best Team Win



“Less than two minutes before it blows up!”

Archie knew he was running out of time. If he didn’t find the last three pieces of the puzzle in the next few seconds, the famous Aboriginal painting they were supposed to retrieve would go up in smoke. His team would be disqualified, and one of the four other teams would win the competition instead.

“And there is our trip to the Northern Territory – about to go up in smoke, just like this painting!” Violet cried out in despair. “I really wanted to see Uluru.”

Focus, thought Archie.

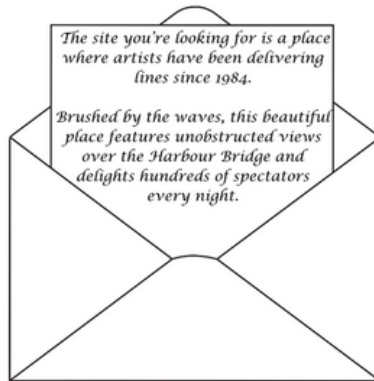
Sure, the quiet thirteen-year-old wanted to win the trip, but above all, Archie was eager to impress his father and teammates. His team had created a special bond since the competition had begun an hour earlier. When he woke up that morning, Archie had no idea he was going to find this competition so exciting. And he’d certainly never expected to get along so well with the group.

The school year had been tough, and Archie had been looking forward to the summer holidays. He loved this time of year, filled with long sunny days, the aroma of barbecues in parks, the mornings at the beach, and afternoons playing soccer with Alex.



Alex was his best friend. They'd met in daycare, and sometimes Archie felt like Alex was the only one who could really understand him. In fact, he'd been relieved when his friend mentioned signing up for Crack the Enigma, an annual competition pitting teams against each other to win a trip to the Northern Territory. This year there would be five teams competing. But even though Archie wasn't particularly interested in solving riddles with four other kids from his high school, he liked the idea of spending the last two weeks of his holidays visiting epic sites like Uluru.

After wolfing down a bowl of cereal, Archie grabbed his invitation, ready for a new adventure. Two cryptic sentences written in perfect calligraphy on the card prompted participants to guess the site for the competition:



It had taken Archie less time to guess that the site was the Wharf Theatre in Sydney than to finish his bowl of cereal.

Organised by the Young People of New South Wales Culture Foundation, this competition for children aged thirteen to seventeen involved solving puzzles and riddles to find supposedly stolen or missing works of art. Each work was inspired by real masterpieces and meticulously recreated for the competition. This year, the artwork they were retrieving was a famous Aboriginal painting.

So, at 9:30 that morning, Archie joined Alex and Violet in front of the Harbour View Hotel in the Rocks district, just a stone's throw from the Wharf Theatre. Violet was in the same history and geography class as Archie and had enrolled him in the competition without telling him.

A few weeks earlier, at the end of the last geography class before the summer holidays, Archie's favourite teacher, Mr Murphy, had told him about Crack the Enigma. He'd explained that this year, the competition was related to Aboriginal culture, and he was convinced Archie had a chance to win.

"I know competitions are not really your thing, but given your interest for Aboriginal culture, I'm sure you can easily win this contest. And who knows? Maybe you'll even make some friends," Mr Murphy had said, trying to convince Archie.

"I'm not smart enough," Archie had retorted.

"Of course you are," Mr Murphy insisted. "Where is this coming from? Sign up, and you'll see that you might surprise yourself." He'd given a knowing smile and placed an encouraging hand on Archie's shoulder.

Unfortunately for the quiet boy, Violet had overheard their conversation and enrolled both of them. And today was their big day.

Violet was sipping hot chocolate from her reusable cup as Archie approached the group. "Hey, Archie! How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good, V. How are you?" Archie replied.

"I'm exhausted. That's why I needed a pick-me-up! The video I posted last night on my blog went viral, and I spent most of the night responding to my readers' comments."

"Aww, we feel sorry for you," replied Archie, amused.

"Are you both ready?" she asked.

"Always," replied Alex. "I just hope we'll be on the same team."

"Yeah, that would be great," said Archie, sceptical.

The three friends reached the reception area of the theatre. After showing their IDs, they walked into a huge room that looked old-fashioned and elegant. The walls had shiny wooden panels with geometric patterns. The lamps, shaped like feathers, gave off a warm, soft light, making the room feel cosy. In the centre of the room was a fancy marble box with gold decorations and mirrors.

"Wow, look at this room! It's like being in an old movie," Alex cheered with excitement.

“It’s incredibly sophisticated,” Violet added.

Dressed in ripped denim shorts and a white crop top, bright against her olive skin, Violet took a video of the place and posted it on her blog. Her forty thousand monthly readers were fashionistas like her, but she knew she could make a killing with this type of video, too.

“Phones are not allowed in here. Please turn them off and place them in this basket,” said a firm-toned woman in her fifties.

She wore a huge beehive bun that reminded Archie of Ms Boyle, his teacher in kindergarten. The badge on her shirt indicated she was part of the New South Wales Young People Culture Foundation.

“Now, follow me!”

The three teenagers followed the woman to a small room located on the right side of the reception hall. Inside, about twenty other participants were waiting in a cheerful buzz.

As the three friends made their way to the front of the room, Alex elbowed Archie violently.

“Ouch! You’re crazy!” yelled Archie.

“Look, it’s Julie and her crew. I thought she was going on vacation this year.”

Julie Spencer was Archie’s sworn enemy. Her arrogant attitude annoyed him. This Miss Know-It-All never missed an opportunity to belittle others, including him. But more importantly, at the beginning of the year, she had stolen Archie’s phone and broken into a random house in the neighbourhood with her crew. She’d filmed the whole thing before texting the video from Archie’s phone to all his contacts, making the entire school believe that he was behind the break-in. This had earned him a week’s suspension from school.

Of course, Archie’s parents had been furious and grounded him for weeks. And while he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong, he’d felt like a disappointment once again.

“Great,” sighed Archie.

“I hope we don’t end up on her team,” Violet whispered.

The event organiser addressed the group: “This year, you’ll have to retrieve a famous Aboriginal painting. It’s been hidden in one of the virtual rooms you’re about to explore. Each one of you will receive a VR headset and a special T-shirt featuring electrode patches. Once your teams have been created, you’ll be asked to put them on. Each team will start in a different room and will have to solve five puzzles. The second to last puzzle will lead you to the room where the painting is located.

“Now, here’s the tricky part: only one team will be able to enter the last room. This means that the faster you solve the first four puzzles, the more likely you are to be the first team to reach the last room and retrieve the painting. If you fail to find it within the time limit, the masterpiece will blow up virtually, and you’ll be defeated. The second-fastest team will then have a chance to enter the room and solve the last puzzle.

“One last thing,” she added with a mischievous smile. “Every time your team gives a wrong answer, you’ll have to face a challenge. If you fail, you will be automatically eliminated. If you succeed, you’ll be able to continue. However, the time used during the challenge will be deducted from the hour you have to retrieve the painting.

“Now, the moment you’ve all been eagerly waiting for, I’m sure... Forming the teams!”

The woman, seized by a violent coughing fit, took a tablet out of her bag. She cleared her throat and began reading the list of names on the first team.

None of the three friends were on it.

She continued until four teams had been formed. At this point, only Julie, Alex, Violet, Archie, and six other kids they only knew by sight were left.

“For the fourth team, I’d like Alex Smith, Archie Bennett, Ruby Young, Violet Nemeh and Max Yin to step forward,” announced Miss Beehive Bun.

“Awesome, we’re together!” Alex burst with excitement.

“And we avoided the worst with Julie,” Archie rejoiced.

“Now we just have to beat the other teams. Uluru, here we come!” Violet said, with an enthusiastic smile.

The two remaining members of the newly formed team walked up to the three companions. Ruby Young wasn't in any of their classes, but they'd all heard about her. She often went to the arcades to play Mining craft and had won several tournaments organised by the entertainment centre. Archie had even lost to her once or twice.

But Ruby wasn't just good at Minecraft. Archie had heard that she was such a tech genius that she'd managed to hack a teacher's computer and change the grades of some of the classmates she didn't like. She waved at him.

"Hey Archie, I had no idea you were into these types of contests."

"I'm not. My friend Violet here signed me up without me knowing. These contests aren't really my thing."

"And you call that a friend? she sneered.

"What does that mean? Violet said, visibly upset at the comment.

"Nothing," replied Ruby.

An athletic boy confidently approached the group while deftly tucking a rebellious strand of hair back into place. "Hey, I'm Max," he announced. A glimmer of amusement sparkled in the depths of his dark eyes. "And you?"

"Hi," Archie replied, wary.

He'd also heard about Max. He played rugby and was super popular with the girls.

And if his muscular physique, shiny, jet-black hair, and almond-shaped eyes were appealing, it was his enthusiasm and cheerful personality that had earned him his huge popularity.

Archie was convinced that Max was the kind of son his own father, who also played rugby, would have liked to have. Confident and always up for an adventure, Max was the opposite of Archie, who always doubted himself.

In the meantime, Miss Beehive Bun had finished calling out the teams. Her raspy voice interrupted the introductions. "The victorious team will win a trip to the Northern Territory. Any questions?"

The five teams were eager to start.

"Let's go," Louis, one of Julie's lackeys, shouted. "We're going to crush you," he added, looking at Archie and his new teammates.

Max chuckled. “Coming from a cockroach like you, that’s rich!”

“It’s time to enter your respective rooms,” the organiser said, tapping on her tablet.

The five doors in front of them opened.

“You have one hour,” she announced as the teams adjusted their VR headsets where the countdown timer flashed 60:00.

“One last thing,” she added. “The VR glasses combined with your T-shirts are designed to provide you with a sensory experience based on your five senses. This includes sight and hearing but also touch. So be careful not to hurt yourselves. You will feel the pain if you do!”

Archie, Alex, and Violet looked at each other puzzled. This competition was going to be even harder than they’d anticipated.

When Archie’s team entered the first room, the children were immediately transported back in time. On the left wall, they saw black-and-white photos showing important moments in Australian history. Some of them illustrated the celebrations from 1901, when the six colonies forming Australia joined together to create the Commonwealth of Australia.

As Archie walked past the photos depicting parades and celebrations that took place on this historic day, they came to life. The noise of the crowds echoed through the room.

The rest of the glass-encased images portrayed Australian soldiers during the two World Wars. One showed their landing at Gallipoli in Turkey, on 25th April, 1915.

Archie moved closer and a cannon shot rang out. He could clearly remember Mr Murphy explaining that this battle had marked the true birth of the Australian nation.

On the right side of the room were displayed snapshots of indigenous civil rights activists. Archie had learned in school that their relentless efforts had allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to gain voting rights in 1962 and to be considered part of the population in 1967.

In the centre of the room was a large wooden table with archival documents, books, newspapers and historical memorabilia displayed on it. Australian flags representing each state hung from the ceiling.

“Wow, this collection is amazing!” marvelled Alex.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s nice and all, but where’s the puzzle?” Max interrupted.

Archie moved closer to one of the posters. Most of the objects displayed in this room were photos or illustrations. He read several of the captions at the bottom of the photos and illustrations, but none of them seemed like a puzzle.

He came to the conclusion that it was hidden in one of the handwritten documents that had been spread out on the wooden table. He looked at the time in the corner of the screen displayed on his glasses. It showed 56:15. They had spent nearly four minutes searching for something that would help them solve the riddle.

“There’s absolutely nothing in these old documents,” Max said. “I’ve looked at everything, and they’re mostly letters from soldiers to their families.”

Archie wanted to check out these documents himself. After all, the puzzle had to be hidden in one of them. There was no other option, but he didn’t want to come across as confrontational or even worse, as a know-it-all. So, he stayed silent instead and continued exploring the room while anxiously glancing at the digital clock displayed in the top-hand corner of his virtual glasses.

It now showed 55:50. The clock was ticking.

“I found the puzzle!” Ruby yelled suddenly.

She was holding a copy of the famous Sydney Morning Herald newspaper.

“It’s a crossword puzzle. I found it on the second to last [LE1] page of the newspaper. The questions all have to do with the photos, posters and objects displayed in this room.”

*What an idiot!* Archie thought. We would have saved time if I had said something!

The four teammates approached Ruby. Her emerald-green eyes were fixated on the questions displayed next to the crossword puzzle grid.

Without warning, a man dressed in a white linen shirt, navy-blue pants and a gold-trim jacket, appeared in front of the five children. He also wore knee-high leather boots and a black tricorn hat. His powdered wig seemed straight out of a film set in colonial Australia.



“Hello! My name is Theodore. I’m here to guide you on your mission to solve these crosswords. Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes!” the group voiced in unison.

He began by reading the first question: “What’s the name of the disastrous military campaign that saw Australians fight in Turkey during World War One? The word you’re looking for is nine letters long.”

“That’s easy,” Max exulted. “They talk about it everywhere in this room; it’s ‘Gallipoli!’”

Ruby grabbed the fountain pen placed on the table and began to fill in the grid. A ‘ding’ followed by vibrant musical notes echoed in the room before Max’s answer appeared in one of the columns.

Theodore continued, “What did the unification of the six British colonies result in? Twelve letters!”

“The Commonwealth of Australia, so the answer is ‘Commonwealth!’” cheered Max. “It looks like I’m going to crush this competition, my friends,” he added with enthusiasm.

“Don’t get too carried away, young man,” Theodore cautioned. “The next question is tougher. Who was prime minister when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ voting rights were introduced in 1962? His name is seven letters.”

Archie thought he knew the answer, but the sceptical looks on his teammates’ faces made him hesitate.

“I think I know the answer,” he finally mumbled, “but I’m not 100% sure.”

“Are you thinking of John Howard?” Alex asked.

“I thought about it but the name Howard is made up of six letters not seven,” replied Archie.

“Then who?” asked Max.

“I would say Robert Menzies, but I’m not sure.”

“Time is ticking, team. Do you confirm this answer?” interjected Theodore.

Archie hesitated. The digital clock displayed 53:47. They’d already spent nearly eight minutes here, and they were still in the first room.

“Should I write MENZIES in the grid?” asked Ruby.

“I don’t know. If the answer is wrong, we’ll have to face a challenge.” said Archie.

“We trust you,” said Alex in a reassuring tone.

“Okay, let’s confirm then,” said Archie, still hesitant but aware that they needed to move forward.

When Ruby finished filling in the corresponding row, a ‘ding’ followed by a rapid series of musical notes rang out.

“Yes!” shouted Max, raising his clenched fist in victory.

Archie felt relieved.

“Here’s the next question: Which city became the capital of Australia in 1913? Eight letters for this one, folks!”

The group shouted, “Canberra!” in unison.

“Which city hosted the Summer Olympics in 1956? The word you’re looking for is in nine letters,” Theodore continued.

“Ah, that’s super easy. It’s Sydney! My grandfather is always talking about these games because he attended them,” Max affirmed.

“Okay, great,” said Ruby, frantically filling in the grid without taking the time to check the number of squares.

A deafening gong echoed.

Theodore shook his head disapprovingly. “The answer was Melbourne! The Sydney Olympics took place in 2000. Since you provided the wrong answer, you must now face a challenge. It’s a regatta. And the stakes are high, team!” He exclaimed.

“You will be in a virtual competition with another team on a river. The finish line is two kilometres downstream. As you approach it, you will see a green flag planted on the riverbank. But be careful, folks, one of the river’s branches leads to a 60m-high waterfall. Now, the good news is, if you find yourselves there and manage to survive the drop, you can still reach the finish line, as this branch joins the main river. But you will have wasted precious time as the countdown will continue.”

“Speaking of time, you have 52:37 minutes left. If you win, you can continue the competition. If you lose, you will be eliminated. Are you ready?” Theodore added.

“I’m sorry,” Max apologised sheepishly.

“It’s also my fault,” said Ruby. I should have counted the number of letters in the word Sydney before writing it down.” She blushed as her teammates, disappointed, were all looking at her.

The five teammates were immediately transported to a wooded area bordering a river. Two rowing boats, The Dragonfly and The Beetle, were waiting for the teams to board. Their virtual opponents were wearing neon green bibs.

Three colour options appeared in front of them.

“What colour should we choose for our bibs?” asked Violet.

“Who cares?” replied Ruby, her frustration evident.

“Red,” interjected Archie. This wasn’t the time to argue.

Their five avatars turned into athletic rowers with red bibs. They were sitting in the rowing boat named The Dragonfly. The team was determined to win the challenge against The Beetle.

Just before the starting signal sounded, they heard Theodore’s voice behind them.

“Remember, team, if you take the wrong river arm, you’ll end up in the rapids!”

The oars plunged into the water as each team fought to take the lead in the race. While the five friends felt the rush of excitement, they quickly realised that they lacked coordination.

Max was at the helm, trying hard to maintain the course by operating the small lever in front of him but struggling to steer the boat straight. Alex and Archie were at the back, rowing powerfully, but their paddle strokes were unsynchronised. Ruby and Violet, sat in the front, struggling to keep up.

After a few seconds, their opponents overtook them, taking advantage of the team’s lack of coordination. The five friends tried to adjust, but with each paddle stroke, they seemed to deviate from their course.

They progressively fell behind. Tension rose. They knew they had to fix their lack of synchronisation quickly, or they would lose the race.

As the first turn approached, Max had an idea. Since the green team was perfectly coordinated, they’d have to be cunning if they wanted a chance to win.

“Guys, I have an idea,” he said, hopeful. “We’ll make them believe we’re giving up just before the turn. Hopefully, they’ll ease their efforts. And we’ll speed up in the turn to catch up with them. Be careful, though; we need to be more coordinated. To balance the force on each side, Violet and Archie will paddle on the left and Alex and Ruby on the right. I’ll stay at the helm.”

“Great idea!” agreed Archie. “That way, we can balance the forces and gain more speed.”

Ruby reached out for a high five with Alex as he swapped places with Violet and came to sit just behind her. He was delighted. He felt like Ruby liked him, and the feeling was mutual.

“At my command, raise your oars in the air. They’ll think we’re forfeiting,” announced Max.

Meanwhile, the opposing boat glided over the water. The helmsman frequently glanced in their direction.

When The Beetle approached the turn, Max ordered his team to lift their oars.

A few seconds later, once The Beetle had disappeared from their sight, he instructed them to row again, this time in a more synchronised manner.

As they approached the turn, the passengers of The Dragonfly, much more coordinated this time, rowed, following Max’s instructions.

A few seconds later, they exited the turn and entered a river arm bordered by majestic oaks. Their branches touched the water. Max’s trick had worked! Their opponents had eased their efforts and were now only a few metres ahead.

“They’ve closed the gap!” the helmsman of the rival team shouted in frustration.

The Dragonfly was now gliding over the water at full speed. But just as it was about to overtake The Beetle, the adversaries used their oars to push with all their might on The Dragonfly’s hull.

Wanting to counter the attack, Archie, who was sitting at the back just in front of Max, accidentally hit one of his rivals on the hand with his oar. The avatar let go of his own oar and twisted in pain.

“Well played!” shouted Max.

Archie felt guilty, but he'd had no choice. The attack had been sudden and they had to defend themselves.

Unfortunately, though, it wasn't enough. Their opponents managed to divert The Dragonfly away from its course, sending it to the wrong path towards the rapids.

Caught off guard, the team failed to correct the trajectory in time. The five companions quickly found themselves being carried away by a strong current that made every manoeuvre much more difficult.

"We're heading for the rapids!" Violet screamed in horror.

"What do we do?" Alex chimed in, struggling to maintain his grip on the tilting boat.

As they traversed the rapids, Archie could hear the muffled roar of a dizzying waterfall.

It was getting closer.

"I don't know," replied Max, his voice barely audible. "I've never rowed in deadly rapids before."

Archie had. In survival camp, he'd learned to manoeuvre a kayak in dangerous rapids and even jump off waterfalls several metres high.

Frightened, he faltered for a few seconds. Then, to his surprise, he heard himself say in a loud voice, to drown out the noise of the approaching waterfall, "I think we're going to have to jump into the waterfall!"

"What are you talking about?" Max blurted out, taken aback.

"We could paddle to the edge and drop off," continued Archie. He could feel his throat tighten and his stomach knot.

"Have you gone mad?!" Ruby yelled from the front of the boat.

"We don't have any more time. It's the only way! We have to try," Archie replied.

"So wait—if I understand correctly, instead of finding a way to avoid the waterfall, you want us to jump straight into it," shouted Max, causing one of the veins on his neck to become more visible.

"It doesn't sound great, I know, but if we paddle straight and manage to land vertically, I think we can make it."

“You’re completely nuts. I’m out,” Max shouted furiously.

“It’s way too risky,” Alex added, terrified. “I’m out too.”

“What do you suggest, then?” yelled Archie. He didn’t think they had any other option.

“Not following a guy who thinks he’s Bear Grylls!” spat Max.

“We’d better jump and try to reach the shore,” he added.

While the teammates argued, their boat was dangerously approaching the waterfalls.

“Watch out for the rock!” Alex shouted, his body tensing.

Max tried to steer the boat, now dangerously tilting towards a large boulder. The swirling waters around it seemed to want to swallow them whole. Max managed to avoid the boulder, but the current was strong, and the rocks made navigation incredibly perilous.

The turbulent waters of the rapids violently whipped the children, and they were struggling to cling to the edges of the boat.

Suddenly, the current threw the passengers of The Dragonfly forward. Ruby disappeared into projected foam as the riverbed turned into a series of cascades. She barely had time to catch her breath before the next plunge. They were losing control. The deafening roar produced by the crashing torrents of water hurtling 60 metres below drowned out the screams of the terrified teenagers.

They were headed straight toward the vertical drop-off.