

Sticks and Stones

"Nice twig, mountain man," Haley chuckled as she passed Juan on the narrow path.

Juan scowled. He'd been working on his walking stick for two days. He'd hollowed out the knot at the top, making a smooth loop. "Nothing else to do on this stupid camping trip," he thought.

As they trudged on, the counselor glanced worriedly at the lightning flashing ahead. "Storm's headed toward us. Better seek some shelter in those caves."

The campers struggled up the hillside and into the rocky caverns. Juan found himself alone in the smallest one. He began whittling his walking stick.

"You're gonna have a toothpick if you don't stop carving on that thing," said a loud voice. Juan looked up to find Haley standing in the entrance to the cavern. "Look, Elaine wanted me to ask you to join the rest of us. But it's up to you. I don't care if you—"

A fierce bolt of lightning interrupted Haley's sentence. There was a rumble, and someone yelled, "Cave-in!" Haley bolted for the mouth of the cave, but the roof gave way, and rocks tumbled down around her. She screamed in pain as one landed on her foot.

"I can't move! Help me!" she cried. She felt smooth wood touch her hand and grabbed the top of the stick. Juan pulled her to the back of the cave.

"Oh, my foot," Haley moaned. "It must be sprained."

"Stop whining and help me dig," Juan answered.

Juan started burrowing desperately. But the more he dug, the more rubble tumbled down

around him. He gave up, exhausted.

"There must be another way out of the cave. I say we go for it," said Haley.

Juan thought for a minute. "You might be right. But I should go alone. It'll be faster."

Terror flashed across Haley's usually confident face. "No!" she screamed. "No, you can't leave me alone, OK?"

With a start, Juan realized that Haley was afraid to be alone. "Here, use my walking stick," he said.

Haley took the stick silently. Juan fished a flashlight out of his backpack, and they ventured into the heart of the cave. "Be careful," whispered Haley. "The ground might not be stable."

Soon Juan noticed a light ahead of them. "Let's go!" he yelled. He took off, disappearing into the darkness.

"Wait! You might—" She shrieked as she heard the sound of earth giving way. Then she heard Juan yelp. "Where are you, Juan? I can't see! Where are you?"

"Haley?" a small voice called. "Haley, I'm in trouble."

Haley crept forward through the passage. Ahead, in the distance, she saw a narrow opening, through which daylight shone. She also saw that to her left, the ground dropped off into darkness. Then she heard Juan's voice. "Haley! I'm down here." Haley could barely make out the form of Juan. He seemed to be below her.

"Juan! I can't see you clearly, but I'll lower your stick over the side. Grab it and I'll help pull you up." Haley crouched on the ledge, bracing herself against a large rock.

"You're not strong enough," he protested.

"Please," she laughed. "I beat Harold Parker at arm wrestling. I think I'm strong enough to save a skinny kid like you." She gripped the stick through the loop and lowered it over the side.

Haley felt Juan's weight as he grabbed the stick and began to half-pull, half-climb. She pulled with all her strength, wincing as pain shot through her foot. Rocks and clumps of dirt dropped below her.

She groaned, fearing that she couldn't pull much longer. At last, Juan scrambled onto the ledge.

"Thanks, Haley," he panted.

"Not a problem, Juan," she grinned.

They sat on the ledge until they caught their breath. Then Juan stood and helped Haley to her feet, handing her the walking stick, and the two made their way through the cave toward the sunlight.