

PETER POMMER

Christopher's Cloud

AN EPIC ADVENTURE



Christopher is tired of his South Pacific island life. His father's coral research is drying up, and money is tight. Having just turned sixteen, he's ready for something new, but not sure what. One day, a mysterious cloud appears before him. What could it be? Captivated, he enters... Part sea story, part sci-fi, part adventure realism, Christopher's Cloud is a coming-of-age tale that pits Christopher against problems he never could've imagined...

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Chapter 1

Vava'u Island, Tonga South Pacific

In the bright Pacific sky, a shadow passed.

Christopher hardly noticed as he ground away at the bottom of a fifty-foot sloop in the boatyard. Perched high on metal stands, the green hull loomed over him. Determined to finish, he toiled on, green paint dust billowing out like thick smoke. Soon the insidious powder seeped under his mask. *This sucks*, he muttered, then shut off the buzzing tool and stepped away. When the green fog settled, he moved back to check his work, but the shadow returned. He spun around, only to glimpse a small cloud duck behind another boat. He quickly followed, but when he approached, it disappeared. Christopher stopped. *Weird*, he thought, and lowered his mask.

"Hey, Dad?"

His father emerged from the other side of the boat in tattered coveralls. "What's up, Chris?"

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"That cloud."

His father looked skyward, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun.

"No, not up in the sky," Christopher corrected. "Like a fog near the ground."

"What are you talking about?"

Christopher's shoulders dropped; he scratched his head. "Great, now I'm seeing things. The heat must be getting to me," he said and wrinkled his nose. "I think I'm done sanding the bottom." Then he shook his hair like a wet dog. A green plume issued from his mopyy locks.

His dad grinned.

"What?" Christopher said.

"You could star in an alien-zombie movie," he said, pointing at Christopher's eyes. "The green eye shadow is especially good."

Christopher summoned his best zombie face.

His dad just shook his head and turned to the hull. "For an extraterrestrial, though, you do nice work."

"Thanks. But I don't think I want to make a career of this," Christopher replied, crunching on paint grit. He spat on the ground. "I could use some water."

"Go ahead, Chris. I'll help you finish up. We should get going if we want to catch the ferry home. That's an overnight sail, and I don't want to miss your mother's birthday."

Christopher made an O with his mouth. "Yeah...I almost forgot."

In his baggy white paint suit, Christopher swished to a worktable for a bottle of water and viewed the vast Pacific. It was Christmas break. Out there a hundred miles north was Lanu Mata Island and home. He'd just turned sixteen, and until now he'd never

thought about what he wanted to do with his life. Surely, he thought, he was destined for something better than this. But squinting at the sun, the ocean breeze in his face, he had no clue what that might be.

He then turned to his father dutifully scraping the bottom of the sloop. Covered in grease and oil, with a balding pate and crooked glasses, you'd never know he was a coral expert with a Ph.D. in Marine Biology. In fact, both his parents were a bit unconventional. They were hippie adventurers who had sailed all over the South Pacific and thought Tonga would be a good place to raise a family. For his dad, Tonga was the ideal place for coral research. His mom had a graduate degree, too, except she was a lit major. They always said when they returned to the mainland U.S., they'd be professors again at universities. But for the time being -- which had been over eight years, Christopher kept reminding them -- they survived off odd jobs and various research grants so his dad could stay in the South Pacific studying coral. So here they were, another odd job, scraping boat bottoms on Vava'u Island.

Christopher took a seat on an overturned bucket beside his dad, who was finishing up details with a scraper. His dad handed him a putty knife. "Here, E.T."

Christopher reluctantly took it. "So when are you going to start teaching at a university again so we can move back to the States?"

"Do I detect a whiny tone?" his dad responded, peering over his glasses. Then he turned back to his

work. "Maybe soon, Chris. I don't know. My coral research has been wonderful out here. But sometimes I wish I had a regular job."

"You don't say," Christopher returned sarcastically.

His dad chuckled at the green-lined mask imprint on Christopher's face. "Ahh, Chris, this hasn't been so bad. Look at what you've experienced out here in the Pacific. How many kids do you know who get to live on an island with rats that gnaw on their beds? And when the power goes out, we get to work on the diesel generators all night." His dad raised his hands and smiled. "And then there's times like this."

Christopher screwed up his face. He knew where his dad was coming from. Sometimes his island life was difficult, but he had to admit that at other times, it was idyllic. He'd grown up playing on some of the most beautiful beaches in the Pacific. And the ocean was as warm as bath water, with an unlimited wilderness beneath. But lately, he couldn't get over the downside. The isolation could be numbing. When Christopher was younger he didn't mind, but more recently Lanu Mata had begun to feel detached from the world, especially without cell service.

Christopher's dad started packing up their tools. "This looks good, Chris. Why don't you get cleaned up, and we'll hit the road."

Christopher hurried off to the yard faucet. Dousing his head with water, he spotted a broken mirror and picked it up. Blue-grey eyes with a well-proportioned nose stared back, and long, wet, sun-bleached hair

framed his face. A line of green paint still encircled his nose. He tried rubbing it with his t-shirt but had no luck. Giving up, he grimaced and turned to join his dad. But when he did, he noticed a ladder propped against the stern of the sailboat. They had to go, but why not. He hadn't been topside yet.

Christopher quickly scurried up the ladder. *Awesome boat*, he thought as he took in the teak deck and cockpit. He stepped behind the wheel and imagined himself at sea, his eyes checking sail trim. Then he leapt forward and pushed open the main hatch. Down below, varnished mahogany cabinets lined the salon, which had tufted settees and teak and holly floors. It was a Hinckley from Maine, one of the best names in New England. This boat was a classic old school yacht. Presidents and rich people coveted these boats. They weren't just sailboats; they were works of art. This owner had taste. And money. Running his hand along the joinery, he couldn't help but find yachts like these familiar somehow. The opulence of the cabin felt right. Like he belonged. Somewhere deep inside he knew the comfort of wealth, like he'd lived it before.

He popped his head through the forward hatch and dreamed of being on the water, sailing away. *Wouldn't that be nice. Get out of here. Live somewhere with more people, more things to do.* Then something caught his eye. He craned his neck to see.

The cloud.

From his vantage point on deck, he clearly saw it, twenty yards off on the edge of the boatyard, but this

time it wasn't moving. *What is that?* He squinted. *Clouds usually aren't that still.*

In rapt attention, he clambered down the ladder and started for it, quickly at first, then slowly, eyes riveted as he approached. Hovering like a ghost, the cloud was blurry white and seemingly opaque and then not. He thought he could see palm trees on the other side; they faded and reappeared. As Christopher closed in, he shifted his head for a different angle; its surface seemed to undulate like water. *Wow!* He glanced up. There were no clouds in the sky. Certainly no fog. No one had been running a smoky engine. Cautiously, he moved closer. *How bizarre. It's like it's waiting.* Finally, at arms-length, he stood, mesmerized. Twice as tall as him and a boat-length wide, the cloud remained, constantly shifting as if it were alive. Christopher lifted his hand, but then withdrew. *No. What if it's acid or something?*

He picked up a small rock and lobbed it in. *Whoa!* It disappeared. Then he spied a shovel leaning against a boat. Slowly, he poked the handle into the cloud. Like magic, the wood vanished, pixelating apart. *Oh my god! What is this thing?*

Christopher was stunned. He stood there, mouth agape, staring at the shifting vapor. But again, he was drawn to it like a force was inviting him in. He looked at his hands. The temptation overwhelming, he moved his right hand forward. Closer and closer...then...instantly, his fingertips started disappearing. He snapped back and examined his skin. He was whole again. No pain. *What is...?*

Christopher's Cloud

"Christopher!! Let's go! We're late!" his father yelled from the distance, startling him. *Darn!* he whispered and briefly glanced toward the call. When he looked back, the cloud was gone. *Oh man! Where'd it go?!*

"Christopher!" his dad hollered again.

"Coming! Coming!"

Christopher grabbed his pack and dashed after his father, who was already halfway down the road to the ferry port. Running as fast as he could, his breath waning, he heard his father just ahead of him.

"They're casting off!"

Christopher's legs growing weak, he finally caught up, but it was too late. The ferry was twenty yards off blasting its horn. "Ahh...we missed it!" Christopher moaned, trying to catch his breath.

Christopher's dad dropped his bags. His shoulders slumped. "Chris, where were you?"

"I...I saw....," Christopher halted midsentence, his chest heaving, and suddenly realized that what he'd seen was too crazy to explain. "Sorry, I was just looking at that sailboat."

His dad thrust his hands on hips. "You got caught up looking at that boat?" He rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "You and your mother. I swear you're cut from the same cloth. Staring at boats just for the aesthetics." He sighed and looked away for a moment. Then he faced Christopher again, his frustration calmed. "It is a beautiful boat, isn't it?"

Christopher nodded and bit his lip.

"It's okay," his father offered. "We were probably going to be late anyway."

They plunked down on the curb. "Hmm," his father said. "I wonder when the next ferry is?"

Christopher shrugged, still feeling a little guilty.

Then with typical optimism, his dad's eyes lightened. "Hey, what about a Coke, Tiger? I saw a machine a ways back. I'll get us two while we think on this. We can't miss your mom's birthday." With that, he raised his lanky frame and hurried away.

Christopher felt better, but he couldn't escape what had happened. He didn't want to be the reason they missed his mom's birthday, but the cloud had boggled his mind.

Christopher gazed back up the road as if the cloud might have followed. *I wonder...* he thought. *It was like it was there just for me.*

Chapter 2

Anxiously awaiting his father, Christopher heard another departure horn. He turned to the quay and noticed a small freighter tied up at the docks with an old deck hand preparing to leave. Christopher caught the name *Marlee* roughly scrolled across her transom. He'd seen these freighters before in Vava'u and Lanu Mata. They transported everything from potatoes to kitchen sinks to the outer islands. About eighty feet long with a stubby pilothouse, this one looked ready to sink. Christopher glanced back once more, not wanting to leave, but knew they had to get home, so off he hurried.

Nearing the dock, he saw the captain, a haggard looking man, digging through drawers in the wheelhouse of the *Marlee*. "Sir. Hello, sir. Ah...captain..."

He looked up, glassy-eyed.

"My father and I. We're looking for a ride to Lanu Matu."

"...Huh?"

He seemed drunk and started to turn away, so Christopher blurted, "We can pay!"

The captain responded in a rough voice. "Okay, Okay...You sleep on deck. Castin' off in five."

"Sweet!"

Christopher tore off the dock and found his father just turning the corner with a pair of Cokes. "Dad, Dad! Hurry!"

In no time they were leaving Vava'u, the freighter, *Marlee*, belching black smoke. After paying the captain, his dad approached with tired eyes. "Thanks for keeping a sharp eye, Chris," he said, passing him on the side deck. "I think I'll find a cozy nap spot and see if I can blot out these grinding diesels."

Christopher worked up his first real smile in days. "Sure, dad. I like these trips," he responded. And normally he did. That feeling of well-being he got when heading out was a sure thing, rusty hulk or not. But this time, his mind was stirring.

He clutched the rail and peered out to sea, searching the horizon north to south. But he saw no clouds. No ships. Not even a thin haze across the sky. Just the endless ocean swell marching across the Pacific.

Frustrated, Christopher turned from the rail and saw the old deck hand mending line. He looked up at Christopher, focused his steely eyes for a moment and returned to his work. With a ratty Greek fisherman's cap, threadbare shirt, and a leathery face, he could've passed for a museum replica of an old sailor. Even his jagged-edged tattoos appeared authentic. Christopher was studying one on his forearm when their eyes met.

"What are you splicing?" Christopher asked, gesturing to his work.

"Just mendin' an old rope," the deck mumbled and resumed plying line.

Christopher was intrigued. This old guy looked like he'd spent a lifetime at sea. He had a permanent squint, but Christopher could make out bright blue eyes. "Have you been in any bad storms?" Christopher inquired, wanting more out of him.

The deck hand didn't look up this time. An awkward silence followed. Dejected, Christopher let him be and turned back to the ocean streaming past. Nose to the wind, he hunted for that cloud, hoping he'd see it again when..."I saw you lookin' out to sea. Had that look in your eye," the deck hand interrupted. Christopher turned.

"What?"

"That look in your eye. I saw it." Then he gestured toward his dad. "That's your father?"

"Yeah, we were in Vava'u scraping boat bottoms."

"Ah, the delight of every sailor," he joked and almost formed a smile. Then he said, "I'm Chancy. You?"

"Christopher...Christopher Pedersen," he said and slunk down across from the old man.

Chancy just nodded, reached into a bag, and brought out a pipe. He stuffed some tobacco in the bowl and lit it. Christopher sat there, watching him. He liked his gruff manner. He was mysterious in a way, like a poker player. But he'd set Christopher on edge.

"You said I had that look," Christopher said.

Chancy exhaled a swirl of smoke and settled on Christopher. "When you were standin' at the rail, I could tell you were lookin' for something. What was it?"

Christopher squirmed. He wasn't sure he wanted to share what he'd seen, but he did want to get it off his mind. Besides, this guy had probably heard lots of weird stories at sea.

Christopher cleared his throat. "Ah...it was probably nothing...but I saw a strange cloud. Like one I've never seen."

"What did it look like?" Chancy questioned, head down, knotting away.

"It was all white, about the size of a shed, and it was kind of like I could see through it or into it and..." Christopher hesitated and swallowed.

Chancy stopped splicing. "...And what?"

"It undulated like it was alive..." Christopher said in a quiet voice.

Chancy inhaled from his pipe and blew out a long wisp of smoke. Then he leveled his steely blue eyes at Christopher. "You sure it wasn't a cloud of smoke from an engine or somethin'?"

"Oh yeah...yeah, I'm sure," Christopher affirmed.

Chancy narrowed his brows. "Where'd you see this cloud?"

"Back at the boatyard..." Christopher said. Then he cocked his head. "Why? Do you know what it was?"

Chancy cradled his pipe in one hand and leaned toward Christopher, his gaze even more intense. "Son, I'm not sure what this cloud was, but by the look on

your face, whatever you saw was a lot more than probably nothing." He pursed his lips like he was going to continue but instead just tilted his head like he was thinking.

Christopher was drawn in.

Then arriving at what to say, Chancy resumed. "I've seen a lot of strange things and heard many a tall tale from a life at sea. There are things in this world that you wouldn't believe. Some are fantasy, and some, very surely, are not. But I'll tell you, if you happen to see this cloud again, and find yourself drawn to it, watch out. It could be far more perilous than you ever imagined."

Chancy let that settle for a moment. Then he placed his pipe in his mouth and carried on with his rope.

Christopher sat frozen, not knowing how to respond. Then he gulped and dumbly mouthed, "Oh...okay."

Just then, the captain's voice hollered from the wheelhouse. "Chancy! Where are ya?! That starboard engine's heatin' up. Chancy!"

Chancy gathered himself like an old bear. "Okay, okay!" he growled back. But before he left, he glanced at Christopher one last time.

Buzzing with wonder, Christopher walked to the bow of the *Marlee*. Chancy's words had shot to his core. He found a nook and lay down on an old net, his mind spinning. He kept thinking, *This is too weird. Had Chancy seen the cloud? Or was he just trying to scare*

me? What strange things had he seen? Christopher lifted his head and looked aft, wondering if he should ask. He was just forty feet away. Then he shook his head. *No way. I need some time to think on this,* he thought and slumped his head back into a pillow of rope.

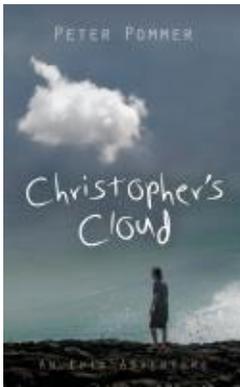
Staring up at the darkening sky, Christopher's head whirled. *What was that cloud? Some rare atmospheric thing? A trick of the sun? Maybe that paint dust really was getting to me?* Then his mind wandered to the mythical. *Or was it like the Bermuda Triangle, where stuff just disappears? Wow. Maybe it was a UFO?*

In time, a star appeared in the east. Christopher focused on its dim light. *What's out there, anyway?* he asked. But the more he questioned, the more the star blinked answerless in return.

Before long, he found himself exhausted. The cloud, the strange encounter with Chancy, the long days of work, and the droning diesels had taken their toll. His head began lolling back and forth with the swell. Soon his eyelids shuttered. The last thing he saw was a half-moon coming into view.

*

Sometime in the night, he awoke, or thought he awoke, and glimpsed the hazy silhouette of Chancy staring out to sea. He was searching north to south.



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