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Welcome

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Island Company

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(A novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to read this free novel portion from www.killernovels.com

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As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from www.killernovels.com for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

Island Company is a graphic action-thriller with a particularly twisted and often brutal plot. If you enjoy thrills, action and suspense, as well as the spectre of multiple murders, you'll definitely enjoy this. But a warning: *Island Company* is **very gory and rather shocking** in places. It is rather impacting and I guarantee you, it will stick in your memory as one of the more twisted and striking plots you will ever encounter. So please, be warned!

Best of all, *Island Company* offers you the thrill of trying to work out "who's-doin'-it". I have taken great care to give the reader numerous clues, even if some of them are ever so subtle. And beware – there's a major twist at the end. Take the test to see if you can guess it...

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I sincerely hope you enjoyed this story.

Thank you,

I Q Cameron

Now, please enjoy!

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to

withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as 'have faith' or 'simply believe', which are meaningless to the one who doesn't understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as 'going too far', than to indulge in the usual '*too valiant and too true*' hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My 'baddies' are bad, and my 'heroes and heroines' are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing 'real' characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

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CHAPTER 1

The remnants of a light morning fog hung lazily in the cold air as the sleek Ford pulled slowly to a halt beside the imposing structure of Warehouse 12. The car was dwarfed by the monolith of faded corrugated iron and dotted rusty nails, but only when one peered further afield and realized that this hulking relic of forgotten architecture was just one of a stretching string of identical warehouses did it come into proper perspective.

The avenue of faded silver buildings was silent and still, so that even the gentle purring of the car's engine seemed out of place. Simone Redding felt as though a natural peace had returned when Steve Barrett shut off the motor. The two sat motionless in the car for some time without ever a word being spoken, each taking in the silence and stillness. Simone wound down her window, a

move that was immediately mimicked by Steve, but still the two did not speak.

Simone opened her purse, took out a brush and adjusted her short, dark hair. It was an instinctive move, and one that was unnecessary, as the style of her cut meant that she could face a windstorm and still appear quite perfect. Though aware of this fact, she pulled down the sun visor and used its attached mirror to check anyway. She checked her lipstick and face, then smiled briefly at her companion when she realized that he was staring at the needless, though somewhat attractive ritual. He sniffed just enough to show that he thought she was vain, and then smiled slightly. Finally, it was Steve who broke the silence, and their mental deliberations.

"It's deserted," he said, stating the obvious. "But this has got to be the place." He pointed to the enormous painted numbers that covered a substantial portion of the two sliding doors just ahead of them. 12.

Simone gazed up at the huge painted numerals. "The numbers are bigger than our car, Steve. How can you be sure?"

He smirked her sarcasm off, wishing deep down that he could find a way to impress her. Knowing that he could not, he resisted the urge to retaliate, instead turning his attention to a briefcase that rested on the seat behind them. He retrieved it without a word. A pair of handcuffs gleamed, one bracelet already secured through the handle of the case, the other hanging loosely. Steve secured the loose end about his left wrist.

Simone suddenly began a long coughing bout, making a fist, which she held to her mouth for almost half a minute until the soft hacking had passed.

"You okay?" asked Steve. He knew the answer without asking, but Simone could see the concern in his face, and she immediately regretted being so short with him. She cleared her throat and gave him a weak smile.

"C.F. acting up again," she rasped.

This time it was she who gave the unnecessary explanation – Steve knew full well about her condition. He had even taken the time to research the likely prognosis for a young sufferer of cystic fibrosis. He dared to touch her wrist with his free hand.

"You'll be fine," he said warmly, trying to encourage her. "You're a professional." In truth he wondered how much longer the young woman he was so enamored with would be able to continue working for Linford's. Lately her health seemed to be on a roller coaster.

"Thanks," she answered, touched by his sentiment, and she felt even worse about the way she always brushed him off. Annoying he may be at times, she thought, but Steve certainly did have a

pleasant side. Still, Simone continually reminded herself of the mission she was on. There was no time for contemplating the values of Steve Barrett.

The two climbed from the comfort of the warm car to face the cool morning air. Though the sun was rising, they were on the western side of the building, and were immersed in a cold, dark shadow. A brisk breeze whistled by, causing Simone to shiver as she eyed up the vast building. Steve enjoyed the chill and inhaled deeply.

“You and me and peace and quiet,” he said. “I can live with that.”

He knew that it would draw the desired look of warning from her, and was smirking even before she sent him the expected gaze to warn against fraternization. Perhaps she took it all too seriously, Simone mused. Perhaps she shouldn’t be so hard on him. He did not wait for her to verbalize the “business only” boundaries of their working relationship. Instead, he ran the fingers of his free right hand briskly over the Ford’s paintwork in Simone’s direction. The polished paint dripped with small beads of condensation that pooled and then traveled in meandering paths toward the ground, and Steve’s flicking fingers sent a small spray of water in the direction of his colleague.

Simone’s gaze turned to a strained sneer and she grumbled something about “*immature*”. Any thoughts of a possible thawing of her treatment of the young man fled. She stroked her hands over her cream blouse and navy blue slacks, more making a point about how much of the water had hit her than actually trying to wipe any away. And then she weakened, unable to maintain the tough façade. Though she tried to hide it, her tiny smile was unmistakable. She spoke quickly to Steve in an effort to disguise her pleasure.

“*You’re such a jerk,*” she chided, another small cough rasping from her chest. “Come on. It’s freezing out here, and your silly games are going to make us late. We’re supposed to try and look good, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” he retorted. “That’s right. We’re supposed to put on a show for our mystery guest. *Must look our best* – even though this character doesn’t have the decency to tell us his name.”

“That’s the job, Steve,” Simone shot back, always dutiful, always straining to be the professional. Then she tried appealing to his softer side. “Oh come on. You know me. I just want to do my best to look good, that’s all.”

With that she turned her back on him and placed her hands on the two huge sliding doors to prize open the small gap between them. She noted that someone had already unlocked the padlock, which now hung lazily from the rusting latch. Clearly the person they were supposed to meet had already entered and had left the doors slightly ajar. She glanced at her watch, suddenly afraid that

perhaps they were late for their appointment.

“You’ll always look good to me, Simmy,” Steve said, and he enjoyed watching her for a few seconds as she strained, her neat, shapely and yet business-like figure struggling against rusted, unresponsive doors. She ignored his overt flirtation, unwilling to even accept it as a compliment. She was on a mission, and a deep, driving ambition within her refused to allow her to respond to Steve’s advances.

“Come and help me,” she snapped. “Come on. If we’re late the boss will have us for lunch! We’ll never get ahead this way.”

Steve fell in behind her, suspending the briefcase from his thumb while adding his strength to the effort, and immediately there came a low grating sound. The towering vertical sliver of blackness opened before them. When it was wide enough, Simone, always the leader, ceased her effort and stepped into the darkness.

Inside the warehouse the fog hung heavily, and it struck Simone that a more bleak place to hold a meeting might be difficult to find. If the cold, dull shadows outside had subdued her, the inside of the building made her feel nothing short of morbid. Sunbeams stabbed the lingering darkness through a multitude of rusted holes in the eastern wall, revealing both the state of the huge metal structure and some of its inner workings. There was little to see. As their eyes slowly adjusted to the pervading darkness and eerie fog, they could see that the warehouse was essentially empty, almost without any equipment or furnishings, and apparently devoid of life.

“It’s huge,” noted Steve, again stating that which need not have been said. “This could pass as an aircraft hangar.”

“Doors are too small,” shot back Simone, again with a hint of sarcasm.

The putdown was not lost on Steve, but again he did not retaliate. Simone thought for a moment of how Steve seemed to be a pleasant enough young man, but somehow lacked any real charisma or flair. His lack of sophistication, she thought, would certainly cost him any real advancement in the company, not to mention her own affections. Worse still, he might even have the potential to drag her down. Certainly, Simone realized, her own career would not be benefited if she did not make the most of this new opportunity. This seemed like a good chance to please the powers above her, especially since she had been hand picked for this mission. Ignoring Steve’s harmless advances and naiveties was a small price to pay, but a necessary one.

Simone stared about, bewildered.

“This can’t be right,” she said. “Are you sure it was number twelve we had to come to?”

She pivoted on one high-heel to stare down any sarcasm Steve might retaliate with, but the need did not arise. Steve made no sign that he would sneer, but merely stated his answer factually.

“It was number twelve. We’re in the right place, Simmy. Maybe we’re just early.”

Simone’s pretty face screwed up as she tried to reinforce a point already made.

“*Simone*, Steve. My name is not *Simmy*. It’s *Simone*. Especially when we are on the job. And we’re *not* early, because the lock had already been opened.” She flashed her eyes in the direction of the bright gap between the large, open doors to make her point. “And that’s why the boss made *me* in charge, and not *you*.”

“The boss made you in charge because you’re a woman, and she’s a man-hater. Everyone knows that. It’s prejudicial, and it’s illegal, but hey – that’s how Virginia Linford operates, and we all know it. *You* know it – *Simmy!*” He waited for her rebuttal, but she did not give one. She knew he was right.

Having both made their point, the argument died in silence. Simone gripped her shoulders with her hands, visibly shivering as she sought to change the subject.

“Stupid business sense,” she griped. “I should have worn a coat and not worried so much about how I’d look. We’re going to freeze to death in here.” Steve was feeling the cold too, and having found common ground, they both eased their defensiveness. He nodded in agreement.

With their eyes now growing more accustomed to the pale light within the warehouse, they could see that the immediate area was bereft of furnishings, except for an old, worn sofa not far from where they stood, and a dusty timber desk just opposite it. The sofa faced east, and the small points of light that dotted it showed just how tired and dusty it was. In the distance a few lengths of timber were strewn about, and beyond that was a small internal office, the only internal room within the structure.

Simone and Steve moved slowly toward the lone items of furniture, and Steve rested the briefcase on the dusty desk. Up close to the desk, their eyes fell on a dilapidated swivel chair behind it, equally crusted with a heavy layer of dust.

“Take a seat, Simmy,” offered Steve, again goading her. Simone ran an index finger over the dirty surface of the desk, gathering a large specimen of dust, and held it up to him. “I don’t think so, thanks just the same. But you go right ahead if you want to.”

He did not respond, but looked at his watch and then voiced an obvious question. “We’re supposed to be here to help with some secret project. Wouldn’t you expect to see some equipment or something? This is really stupid.”

Simone was about to echo her own misgivings when they heard sounds coming from the direction of the internal office. They both shielded their eyes from the rays of light that pierced the sides of the building's eastern wall, straining to see the figure who walked slowly toward them. With a myriad of tiny bright lights blinding her eyes, Simone's pretence of control dissolved almost instantly, and she heard herself calling out nervously.

"Who's there?"

The words, and more importantly the clear presence of apprehension in her voice were out before she could stop them. She immediately regretted having shown fear so easily. If Virginia Linford ever heard of this, it might hinder her hopes of advancement within the company. She rallied her strength quickly, swallowed and repeated the question, this time in a more controlled tone. "Who's there?"

The figure approached without answering, pacing slowly and almost casually toward them. The person's identity was well disguised by the eastern rays of light, which effectively caused a silhouetting effect in the fog. All that Steve and Simone could discern was that their visitor wore a large parka, probably two sizes too large, as, even in poor light, it seemed to hang from its wearer, hiding hands and drooping from the shoulders. Added to this, its hood was pulled over the wearer's head, completely hiding the face in darkness.

Steve did not speak, but stood his ground, holding the case in front of his thighs, with both hands on its handle. The cloak-and-dagger approach did little to impress him.

The hanging fog stirred slightly as the figure approached, and then stood motionless just five meters from the two companions. Still Simone could not see the visitor's face, but she refused to give in to her natural instincts. She struggled to steady her voice against shivering brought on by both the cold and her own fear. Virginia would not tolerate fear.

"My name is Simone Redding and this is Steven Barrett. We have been sent here to help you. May I ask who you are?"

Still the figure did not answer, and Simone thought that she might have to ask again. The need, however, did not eventuate. Slowly a gloved hand, almost completely hidden within the dark mouth of a parka sleeve raised and touched a small device that was stuck to the mysterious stranger's throat. When the person did speak, the words came slowly and in a hushed electronic whisper that was barely intelligible.

"Put the case on the table." The voice was masculine, metallic and vibrating.

A dark glove protruded from the other black parka sleeve, and a long finger unfolded until it

was pointing to the dusty tabletop. The hoarse, mechanical whisper and the secretive approach gave the visitor a silent authority that even Steve did not wish to argue unduly with. Any natural resistance he felt toward the person's clandestine, cloak-and-dagger demeanor was sobered by better judgment and a genuine desire not to upset Simone on what she clearly perceived as a great opportunity for advancement in the company. Still, the secrecy annoyed Steve, and he could not help but make a small challenge. He countered the sinister approach of the visitor by adopting the opposite approach, his tone friendly and open.

“Yes, the case is for you.”

He forced a small grin, somewhat from nerves, and somewhat in defiance of the secretive darkness of their visitor. He extended a hand to their silhouetted guest, and to his surprise the figure shrank back, clearly shunning the advance. Steve then watered down his offer, unsure of how to continue.

“Of course, you'll need to tell us the magic words before we can give it up to you.”

Though Steve and Simone could not see the stranger's eyes, they knew their guest was eying them at length. An uneasy silence engulfed the pair, heavy with mistrust in the remnants of the clearing mists and blinding easterly shafts of light within the enormous shed. Finally, to the relief of both young people, the secretive stranger answered again in no more than a coarse, hushed electronic whisper.

“Island Company.”

With those simple words, both Simone and Steve felt a deep sense of relief wash over them as they realized that while their visitor was eerie, at least they had indeed found their intended recipient. Steve eagerly removed the cuff from the briefcase handle, then carefully placed the case on the dusty table. He stepped back, happy to move away from both it and the silhouetted stranger without delay. His fingers then began to fumble as he sought to remove the remaining shining metal ring from his wrist. Once free of the cold metal, he tossed the cuffs and the key on to the dusty table where they slid and thudded against the soft case. Then both Steve and Simone took another pace backwards, happy to increase the distance between them and their silent visitor.

“Sit!”

The order came, metallic and terse, vibrating hoarsely through the device stuck to the stranger's throat. Both Steve and Simone wanted to argue at the prospect of sitting in such dusty surroundings, and they began gazing about in disbelief. The only place to sit was the dusty sofa, and, dressed neatly as they were, it was far from inviting. However, in the face of a silent and eerie

authority, they submitted reluctantly, Simone sitting on Steve's left.

Further to their surprise, the hidden figure then stepped up to the table, picked up the cuffs and threw them to Simone, who instinctively caught the cold metal bracelets, but said nothing. Even with the person now at close range neither she nor Steve could make out enough of the stranger's face for identification, the figure still silhouetted against a wall of holes and bright light.

"Cuff yourselves together," came the barely audible whisper.

This time the order seemed nothing short of perverse, and it brought a startled look from Simone. However, she and Steve knew their places, and after a long glance at each other, they reluctantly submitted, Steve snapping the cuffs loosely into place over his own left wrist and Simone's right. Loose enough to get free of it, he thought. A crisp ratcheting sound broke the silence and echoed about the empty warehouse as he wrapped the silver band about Simone's slender wrist.

"Look, I don't know who you are, but..." Simone's complaint was cut off immediately by a terse, whispered command.

"*Shhh!*" The order was soft, yet threatening, and it was enough to foil Simone's argument. There seemed little point in complaining. Simone and Steve were pawns, and all parties knew it. They sat in tense resentment at the weird unexpectedness of their plight.

Simone made several attempts to clear her throat, the cold morning air and a small wisp of dust that had risen from the sofa causing her some discomfort. She thought immediately how the genuine medical condition she struggled to contain would surely be perceived as nervousness by the stranger, and she tried all the more to push down the urge to cough. She tried to break the awkward and eerie silence, striving always to remain focused and worthy, unable to say nothing.

"Look, I'm sorry, but we were not told the combination to the case."

The stranger showed no interest in her explanation. Without further response the cloaked head looked down, and in a few seconds the locks snapped audibly open and the lid to the case raised to reveal its secrets. The silhouetted parka hood lowered in interest, and Simone and Steve knew that the stranger was sampling the contents, which remained hidden behind the raised lid of the case.

Simone silently hoped that the hooded stranger was pleased with the contents, her body and mind quite tense. The added fact that the stranger knew the case's combination was further proof that, eerie though this person was, there was now no doubt they had found their intended contact. This thought served to help calm her nerves in what was indeed a very strange situation.

The stranger drew out a large wad of what, even silhouetted, was clearly cash. Several more

wads of money were removed, then replaced before the stranger gave a tiny snort, then began toying with the remaining contents of the case.

“We were assured that everything is there, Sir,” ventured Simone, her voice still shaking slightly as she battled both the cold swirling mists and her own nervousness. She hoped that no one would detect the small quiver. It did not seem to matter, though, as the stranger gave no sign of even having heard her. Simone did not regret speaking, however. She felt tense, and it only seemed fitting that *someone* say *something*. She watched with apprehension as the stranger completed dreaming over the hidden contents of the case.

Simone shuffled awkwardly on the dusty sofa as Steve took the opportunity to hold her hand. His action was somewhere between a supportive gesture and a long held desire. Simone, however, instinctively pulled away from him. She did not want his advances. Nor did she wish to be seen as needing his comfort. When finally she could stand the stranger’s silence no more, she asked nervously, “Is everything okay?”

The secretive figure did not respond except to peer over the lid of the open case into Simone’s face. At this time Simone realized that the sofa had probably been purposely placed facing east, in such a way that the sunlight pouring through the many holes in the wall was more than adequately lighting up both herself and Steve, while leaving their new boss in silhouetted secrecy.

“Do you think we could see you now?” she fumbled nervously. Still there came no response.

Steve for his part remained fixed on the eerie visitor, but did not appear bothered by the obvious ploy to remain unidentifiable while he and Simone were so clearly exposed. When finally the figure did speak again, the voice was very slow and somewhat husky, and so quiet that they could barely hear the words. With the familiar metallic ring in the electronic voice, the stranger said simply, “Thank you.”

Simone was so relieved that she began to respond almost before her visitor’s vibrating words were fully out.

“So you’re happy with everything then?” she blurted, unsure of what to say, but sure that *something* was in order. “Anyway, we’ve been sent to help you with whatever you are supposed to do. We’ve been told to give you anything you ask, and I think you’ll find us more than capable.”

She trailed off, aware that her nervousness was grossly apparent and afraid that such a weakness might ever be revealed to the powers above her. The stranger answered her softly, the voice coming slowly and in a low, barely audible vibrating whisper.

“I’m sure you’ll do an outstanding job, Simone.”

Steve's brow lined as he listened to the reply, surprised at the whispered words. *Something strange*, he thought. The whole thing was *weird*. He suddenly had a thought, and began to compose a question for their visitor in his mind.

But his query would never be heard.

The stranger's right hand removed something from the case, and even silhouetted as it was in the pale light and mist, the shape of an automatic pistol complete with silencer was unmistakable. Steve barely had time to react.

The darkened visitor raised the pistol to eye level and aimed it with an extended arm toward him. The young man reached across with his right hand in an effort to free his left from the cuff, and Simone grunted as her right wrist was jerked heavily toward her colleague. Without further warning in the heavy silence of the warehouse, there came an audible metallic click then several sniffing sounds as the weapon flashed and popped in the direction of Steve's chest.

Simone gasped several excited screams as she heard the sniffing sound from the pistol and then felt Steve pull away sharply on the sofa beside her. Heavy grunts emanated from deep within his throat. She had seen the bright flashes, and instinctively knew that Steve had been shot. He moaned and clutched his chest, pulling her cuffed wrist along with his own, and then slowly he began to slump away from her, pulling her further.

Simone stared after her injured colleague as he slid away to the right. She tried to pull his slumping torso back upright, and spoke feverishly to him, demanding that he respond to her. The only response she received, however, was a long, gurgling moan.

The young woman turned her terrified face to see the stranger still aiming the weapon at Steve, and moving so as to stand before him. As Simone pulled at Steve's arm, the gun flashed and popped again. Steve grunted in objection once more, and pulled with considerable force on Simone's cuffed wrist as he clenched both his hands over this latest injury. Before his body could slump again, however, the stranger fired again, and another small flash blossomed from the silencer.

In an explosion of senses, Simone heard an empty cartridge sing as it danced about on the dusty, cement floor, a pretty sound that seemed out of place amidst such horror.

Steve's body flinched once more with the puncturing bullet, and his moans gave way to a sickly gurgling sound. He made no attempt to stand, but for a moment tried to hold up his free right hand in a sign of protest to his killer. The gesture brought forth yet another popping sound from the weapon, and Steve jerked one last time where he sat, and then slumped away from Simone as he rattled and gurgled in death.

Simone pulled away from Steve in automatic response each time her colleague was shot, almost as though she had received each bullet herself. Her initial gasping screams gave way to a series of horrified howls, then slowly dissipated into frightened whimpers as she turned from her fallen partner to face his killer.

The stranger was still standing as before, but the pistol was now lowered and hanging casually, a small wisp of smoke trailing from the tip of the silencer and mingling with the lingering, white fog. The figure turned and placed the pistol nonchalantly on the far side of the dusty desk, then spoke once more with an almost sympathetic voice, albeit whispered, electronic, and barely audible.

"Shhhh," the voice coaxed. A single gloved finger appeared from within the darkened parka sleeve and stood like a vertical sentinel across the darkened place where the person's face remained hidden within the shadow of the hood. *"Shhhh."*

Simone shook violently with fear, and yet somehow was able to obey. She ceased screaming, but was unable to control the whimpering sounds that erupted from her heaving chest. Slowly but purposefully the figure strolled around the end of the sofa where Simone was sitting, and then moved in close behind her. Steve's slumping body pulled harder at Simone's wrist, and she fought against his dead weight, turning where she sat to face his killer. She was shaking intensely, her voice spluttering with terror between sniffs and heavy breaths.

"What are you doing? You've killed him! What...? Why...?"

"Shhh." The masculine, metallic voice was so quiet now that she could barely hear it, even with the stranger so close to her.

"Steve was the enemy. You are not. I don't want to hurt you. See, I've put the gun down. Don't be afraid."

The voice was very close now, a frozen whisper wafting on an icy breath by Simone's right ear. Up close the whisper became a mix of the familiar metallic vibration of the small device, and of the person's real voice. It seemed to be filled with sympathy, and in a moment of obscure madness and paralyzing terror, Simone found it strangely comforting.

"Shh, Simone. I don't want to hurt you, just him. Now be brave. Linford's girls are supposed to be brave."

Simone could hear an inflection in the voice, and she strained her neck, turning desperately over her right shoulder to stare across the back of the dusty sofa in an effort to view the hidden face, which was now just behind her. It took her a moment to realize that the dark spot she was seeing on

the stranger's throat was in fact the device that emitted the ghostly, evil voice. And then, with the dots of light now dimly illumining the stranger, she could make out individual details of the killer's face. How could she have missed it? It was so obvious up close, and yet the hoarse, hushed whisper had hidden it so well.

"Please, d-don't hurt me," she begged, unsure of what Steve had done to deserve such a cruel and violent fate. There seemed little point in worrying about that now. All that mattered was surviving the horrible ordeal. She tried to reason, and to calm herself. "That's right. *I'm* not your enemy. I'm a good woman and I've always tried to serve the company well. Why would you want to hurt me? You don't need to hurt me. I won't tell..."

The figure brushed against the back of the sofa and crouched on a bended knee so as to move in close to Simone, then whispered in a barely audible voice. "I've no desire to hurt you, Simone. I know you are a good girl. Like I said, *Steve* was the enemy. I think you *know* what I mean."

Simone quivered with a fear that threatened to smother her, and she fought to control it. Clearly she was not seen in the same light as Steve, and this gave her some small reason to hope. A second beacon of hope was the fact that the smoking gun now lay safely on the table across from her, and she could see it. *Surely* there was hope. She *must* remain calm. Besides, it would never do to survive the trial, only to be known as the woman who fell apart when tested.

Her mind raced. Perhaps this was just some bizarre test, and Steve would jump up at any moment and laugh. She sniffed loudly and gasped for air, trying to hide her paralyzing terror. Even when the figure placed an arm slowly over her left shoulder, wrapping the forearm under her chin as though to hug her from behind, she tried to remain composed. Now their faces were close, side-by-side, and Simone could see Steve's killer quite well. She found her fear mixed with the strangest sense of bewilderment.

"*But you're...*" began Simone.

The stranger's voice responded before Simone could finish, cutting her comment off in mid-sentence with another whispered, "*Shhhh*". But Simone was in shock, and she tried to finish her sentence anyway. "But I *know* you. Why would you do this? *Steve* wasn't your enemy?"

"*Shhhh*," insisted the whispering voice. Up close the electronic speech device droned in a low, vibrating whisper. "*No more. You're a good girl. That's enough. Shhh. I don't want to hurt you.*"

Simone let out an audible sigh as the arm that crossed her chest began to pat her right shoulder, and her tenuous relief was evident to both. She shivered, again strangely mindful of the

need to remain calm, and even to excel in the midst of what might simply prove to be nothing more than a macabre test. Steve *seemed* dead enough, she thought. He *had* to be dead. This couldn't be faked – *could it?*

Her eyes danced around the lonely, cold shed, coming to rest again on the silenced automatic still resting safely on the table across from them. Steve's killer moved in so close to Simone's right ear that she could feel the warmth of the stranger's breaths on her cheek. She braced herself, determined not to shudder and therefore show how terrified she really was. Her composure, however, was tested in another moment when she heard the voice whisper in a quiet and sympathetic tone.

"*Sorry.*"

It was just a single word, but it meant the world to Simone. Adrenalin surged through her veins once more, causing yet another paralyzing chill to pass within her. And then she felt the arm tighten about her throat.

Simone grunted. First a whimper, then a grunt. Then a rattle from deep within. *Pain*, she thought. *Oh, such pain.* She felt the arm tense about her throat, not in an attempt to strangle her, but with the intent of holding her steady and hard into the sofa. Her back burned with a searing pain that first caused her to inhale, and then to exhale deeply. And she knew. *She knew.* And it terrified her.

Simone's attacker pushed a long pearl-handled knife slowly forward, held horizontal, its blade laid on the side so as to ease its entry between its victim's ribs. The shining blade was very long and quite slender and narrow, and it slid silently through the dusty fabric of the back of the sofa, then disappeared into a sunken valley of dark, dusty creases as the hilt drove home and refused to be forced through the old seat.

Its victim screamed from deep within as she tried to rise from the sofa, but the attacker's left arm held her tight. The long, cold blade punctured first one lung and then the other as Simone's killer slowly withdrew the weapon and inserted it again, unhurried and without mercy. It was cold and brutal and ruthless.

Simone gasped and grunted, writhing and stiffening, but she was completely overcome by pain and injury, unable to escape or even to scream effectively. The cruel, slender blade penetrated effortlessly and was never rushed, but was inserted with sadistic and heartless efficiency, the killer studying Simone's reactions intently as though learning.

As Simone gasped rapid wheezing breaths, struggling for life, her legs kicked about for a time, then became still again. Both executioner and victim breathed heavily as each played out their

role, the victim whimpering shrilly, and the perpetrator gasping excited, tense breaths.

Then the hand released the knife, its pearl handle remaining protruding from the dusty fabric of the back of the sofa, its callous goal almost complete. The knife handle, like the blade, was long and slender, near-white and carved with intricate patterns. As both Simone and her killer relaxed, each knowing that the cruel task would soon be over, the arm eased about her throat, having served its murderous purpose, though it did not completely release her.

Even in the depths of stupefying pain and deathly terror, Simone could still feel the heavy breaths of her attacker hot upon her cheek, and she could see the piercing eyes taking in her every movement with intense interest. With the long, cold blade having punctured both lungs, they both knew that she would shortly die, and all that remained now was to wait.

Simone coughed and shivered, continuing to gasp shrill whimpers of agony. Terror filled her, and she felt suddenly *very cold*. She felt alone. She and Steve had come to this eerie place together, and now she would die alone. Sheer determination forced her trembling lower jaw to open as she struggled to demand the reason for her heartless fate.

“W-w-w-w-why?”

The word gurgled from her throat as she began to drown in her own blood. *So ironic*, she told herself frantically, gasping. She had always known that her lungs would be the end of her, but she had never guessed the end would come like *this*. The cold, hooded face rested gently against her right ear, and Simone knew that her killer was studying her, shivering with what appeared to be elation. The voice whispered again, this time so quiet that even up close Simone could barely hear it, and still it rung with a metallic vibration.

“You wanted to prove yourself, Simone,” the voice whispered. The breaths were hot and heavy against the doomed girl’s cheek, and they only served to add to Simone’s distress. The ultimate insult, however, came as her killer added the simple explanation. “*So did I.*”

The pain in Simone’s chest and back was deep and deathly, and she could feel her back becoming wet with her blood. Inside she felt as though things were beginning to choke up, torn and destroyed. She writhed slightly as she sought escape from the pain, but then sat very still when the knife, which was still fully inserted in her back and anchored in the sofa, held her steady. The slightest movement only served to add to her pain, and she was forced to surrender.

They remained very still for what seemed an eternity to Simone, as she gasped noisily and struggled to hope for rescue. She heard her breaths rasping in her chest, and wondered how much of that was from her medical condition, and how much was courtesy of her killer’s blade. In those

terrifying moments, Simone understood that she would shortly die. Her tormented mind began to wonder how she would be evaluated by her superiors. She hoped that they would not see her as weak or as a coward, and she hoped they would not judge her too harshly for her fear. After a considerable silence, her attacker spoke softly to her, breaking her delusional contemplations.

“Does it hurt too much?” came the whispered question.

It seemed a surprising question to be asked by someone who had surely just taken her life in such a cold, calculated way, but strangely Simone felt compelled to respond. She was beyond speaking, and was becoming dazed. Her head nodded in slow jerking movements as her mouth opened to speak the word, but refused to make a sound. *Don't hurt me*, her mind screamed. Her eyes darted about. *Oh, help me! Don't hurt me!* And when finally her stubborn mouth succumbed to her frantic will, a single, stuttering word rasped forth.

“Y-Y-Y-Yes.”

“*Shhh, now,*” came the whispered, grating reply. “Shhh. I'll help you. Be still. Just be still.” The hooded face moved so close that the protruding lips kissed Simone's ear as her attacker whispered in soft, gentle tones.

“Listen to me, Simone. My grandfather was a hunter. When he gave me his knife, he told me that he'd once killed a wild dog with it to save his own life. But the one thing he taught me *most*, was that putting the knife in is *never enough*. Like any good story, it's never over *unless there's a twist*.”

Simone's eyes widened as the soft words crashed into her tortured mind. Then, for the first and only time, she heard the stranger's voice whisper so low that it was not distorted at all by the device. Three soft words wafted from the visitor's mouth, gentle yet firm.

“*I'm sorry, Simone.*”

Simone heard the whispered apology for the second time, and her body tensed with what little strength she still possessed, with renewed horror and terror. She could already feel the instrument of her demise burning within her back and chest, but even *that* torture did not match those icy words. She gasped aloud in protest, terrified and gurgling with punctured lungs. Her free left arm rose again to a futile, weak defense, her hand clawing feebly at the arm across her upper chest as her cuffed right wrist became chafed and raw.

Her killer's right hand gripped the slender pearl handle and without further delay, twisted it a full quarter turn clockwise, turned it back, then reefed it over at an angle. The blade within the young woman's chest ripped and sliced flesh and organs without mercy, blood filling her lungs

through jagged, enlarged wounds, her heart sliced almost completely in two.

Simone's mouth dropped wide open in renewed agony and shock as she screamed with what little air remained in her chest, her entire body tensing as she sought to rise from the sofa. Her legs stiffened for several frantic seconds, then relaxed as a shrill squeal died within her throat.

The hooded face gasped too, clear evidence of excitement at the power to kill so decisively. As Simone relaxed completely, her last breaths gurgling eerily within her traumatized chest, her killer's left hand moved to support the girl's chin, holding her steady so that their heads gently came to rest together. The knife slipped silently from its victim and gave a small clinking sound as it was placed lovingly on the dusty floor. Then both gloved hands were about Simone, hugging her for almost a full minute as the killer's excited breaths steadied. When finally the figure let go completely, Simone slumped down into the sofa, away from Steve with her head lolling forward.

Both victims lay silent and still.

There came a low panting from the stranger, who sagged and rested against the back of the sofa for a time. After a while the hooded figure bent and took the long pearl-handled knife in hand again, then stood erect, staring down at the gruesome morning's handiwork. A shivering hand wiped the blade clean on the shoulder of Simone's blouse, then returned it to its secret hiding place within the oversized parka.

Without wasting further time the killer then moved to the table, retrieving and closing the case. A gloved hand quickly retrieved the silenced automatic from where it lay on the dusty table, and the weapon popped and kicked again as the killer fired two more bullets into the chests of each slumping victim.

With all portions of the required task fully completed, the automatic was then slid across the table where it gouged a short path in the dust, the tip of its silencer continuing to smoke long after it had served its gruesome purpose.

The cloaked killer sniffed, taking in the sight of the two dead victims, and then strode out through the vertical rectangle of light between the sliding doors and into the brightening morning beyond.



CHAPTER 2

DAY 1

Captain Mary Stewart braced herself by tightening her fingers around the timber helm as the latest monster passed menacingly beneath the *Mermaid*.

The slow, swollen giant lowered its head as if to pry beneath the gleaming white vessel, then raised its enormous back as it struck out and tried desperately to throw the boat on to its side. This effort having failed, it then sucked and pushed and spat volumes of saltwater at the sleek intruder with its tail as it slithered from bow to stern. The trough that followed the long, spitting wave heralded the onset of the next watery monster, which seemed equally intent on pulling the *Mermaid* down to a watery grave.

It was, however, a request that Mary Stewart would deny the yearning, hungry sea. She thrived on the challenge of a battle with the brooding watery elements, and menacing swells simply added to her delight.

Mary grinned broadly as the sea slapped her face with a fine spray of cold, salty water. She licked her lips, savoring both the taste of her beloved ocean, and of the battle. Her delight was etched deeply into her smiling face as she turned the wheel slightly to port to face yet another monster as it loomed menacingly before the bow, its white cap frothing. The *Mermaid* lurched, and the dull drone of her motors changed pitch as she did battle, then steadied again. All the while the deck rocked and tumbled, tossed about and sprayed afresh with water by each passing challenger.

Mary remained steady, staring over the bow and into the churning sea beyond. Her white uniform of tennis shoes, shorts, buttoned shirt and captain's cap showed few dry patches now, yet this did not bother her either. A few splashes on her crisp uniform were the welcome spoils of battle, and she shimmered majestically in the late morning sun.

John Stone clambered up the shining ladder to stand near Mary, the only brave soul who had dared to do so since the ocean's mood had changed. He gripped the railing near her and turned to face the young captain. Any fears he may have held concerning the ocean's demeanor were not apparent, and in the short moment Mary had to search his face before he spoke, she wondered whether he was truly unafraid, or was perhaps more adept than his companions at hiding his fear.

His face was handsome and shone with fine spray, his dark brown hair matted by the wind and saltwater. Blue eyes flashed back at Mary, a broad, white smile showing Stone's shared enjoyment of the elements. Unlike his fellow male passengers, he wore no necktie, and in fact had

opened the top buttons of his shirt, revealing the top of a muscular, hairy chest and a hint of his own rebelliousness. None of the other travelers had dared to do that.

“You’re enjoying this, Captain,” he said with a wide grin.

Stone stared into Mary’s green eyes, showing clearly his respect for her ability and courage. She flicked several matted wet cords of long blonde hair from her face in an effort to see him more clearly, and to neaten her appearance. It was an unnecessary gesture. Stone could not help but see her beauty. He guessed that she was probably in her mid thirties, though browned and seasoned by the ocean and sun as she was, she may have been a little younger. In any case, any toughening effect on her skin only added to an aura of strength and control. Stone was struck by her confidence as well as her obvious attractiveness.

“I am,” Mary said with a grin, her eyes laughing as she reveled in the battle. Then she turned away to face another onslaught of frothing green and blue, and corrected the helm again. Without turning to face Stone, she spoke over the drone of the engines and the spitting of the sea. “It’ll have to do a lot better than this before I begin to worry. *This is nothing.*”

Stone continued to smile and nodded in reply as he stared casually over the *Mermaid’s* bow along with her captain. His calm demeanor drew a response and another sideways glance from her.

“You don’t look too concerned yourself.” It was as much of a statement as it was a question, and he took it as an opportunity to break the ice.

“I’ve spent most my life on the water. And you’re right, *this* is nothing.”

Stone’s shared love of the ocean stirred an immediate interest in Mary, and she gazed upon him as the next giant passed silently beneath. They both felt their senses being awakened, and neither felt so coy as to hide the fact. After initial introductions were over, Mary asked him a question, clearly interested in her fellow ocean-lover.

“Sails or engines?” she asked, not looking away while she waited for his reply.

“Both,” he answered over the wind, purposefully sweeping a hand through his brown hair to ensure that she was seeing him at the best he could offer. “I don’t mind engines, but I must admit I prefer sails. I like the peace and quiet.” He quickly pointed to the deck beneath him and added a cautionary note, for fear the he might have said the wrong thing. “Mind you, I could get to like this.”

His finger pointed down, but his eyes never left hers, and she could not help but perceive his double meaning.

Mary nodded, still without breaking her stare. Stone was unsure whether she shared his passion for sails or not, but he knew instinctively that she was interested in *him*. It made his heart

skip, a feeling he had not known for what seemed like a lifetime. She did not leave him wondering about the other matter long.

"I'm the same. I've sailed since I was a kid. Got to admit it though, being put in charge of *this* is pretty good."

Stone eyed the *Mermaid* from bow to stern and had to agree. The vessel was around twenty-five meters in length and was fitted out with modern navigational equipment, even on the exposed upper deck. The boat was sleek, new and fast, and the mere fact that Mary had been charged with her care spoke volumes about Virginia Linford's trust in the young captain.

"Truly beautiful," he said, making sure that he made strong eye contact as he spoke the words. She understood that the comment was meant for her benefit as much as the boat's, and simply smiled in return and then broke their gaze. Suddenly afraid that he might have appeared too forward, Stone moved on, questioning her decision to navigate from the exposed upper deck rather than from the comfort of the bridge below.

"Is that why you don't skipper from inside the bridge?" he asked perceptively, pointing down with a finger.

"You got it," she beamed. "No spray down there. I like the wind and I love the sea, and up here I get to see it all. I'll go down later if it gets any worse, but not for now."

Stone nodded. It was a feeling he well understood. Her friendly answer put to rest his fear that he might have offended her with such open flattery. She excited him, and at his age there seemed little point in hiding the fact. It felt as though he had been alone for an eternity.

He peered back over the stern to see two of his fellow passengers leaning hard against the starboard rails of the lower deck, both at various stages of seasickness. Mary followed his gaze before turning back to face the latest menacing swell, and after she had defeated the monster, she noted with a grin, "Not all of your friends share your passion for the sea. I think I've seen just about all of them losing their breakfast."

Stone nodded his agreement, but quickly corrected Mary's assumption.

"You're right. Some of them look pretty sick, but they're not *all my friends*," he said, leaning closer as if the others might hear over the wind. "We're all here on business, and I only know one of them. I think I share more in common with the boat's captain than I do with most of the guests."

It was a clarification and a deliberate flirt and they both knew it. Then he added, "The story of my life."

Mary felt moved by his obvious approach, but knew the limits.

"I'm flattered, but I'm also reminded of the rules, *John Stone*. If Virginia Linford thought for a moment that you were being even *nice* to me, it could cost us *both* our jobs." She let the words sink in, genuinely afraid of the risks of fraternizing with Virginia's prized company executives. "Maybe you people can mix with each other, but us island staff are under strict instructions to stay clear of you. You guys are all strictly off-limits, if you know what I mean."

"Don't feel privileged," he replied cynically. "We're *all* under the same instructions on this trip. Anyway, aren't rules meant to be broken?"

Mary weakened, afraid of Linford's directive, and yet unable to brush Stone aside.

"Sorry," she said, "It's just that the boss is not the most understanding person in the world. You must know that." Stone nodded his agreement as Mary kept the conversation alive, no more keen to lose his interest than he was to lose hers. "What do you mean, the story of your life?"

"I was married once," he said reflectively, dropping his gaze and then looking far away to the horizon. "But, she loved the company and I loved the ocean. She used to come out sailing with me – a lot once, but I always knew it was just to please me. I guess you either love it or you don't. And she didn't. Anyway, it didn't work out."

"Sorry to hear that," replied Mary, but she knew it was a lie. Her interest was aroused as much as his, and the absence of a wife made him all the more attractive.

"It's alright," he said, but his reply was a lie too. He smiled again in an effort to hide his loss. "She ended up hating me, and anyway, she – died – a couple of years back." A short, barely perceptible pause punctuated the trauma he had suffered, and Mary knew that the issue still troubled him. He made light of it.

"The irony is that I ended up staying on with Linford's after she was gone. Now *I'm the one* trying to claw my way to the top. How's *that* for stupid?" He stared a while longer at the distant waves and then looked again at her. "Oh well, *Captain Mary*, it's nice to be back at sea, anyway. And it's *very nice* to meet you."

He brushed off his memories by taking in another long, deep breath of salt air, and a pleasant stare at the vision of loveliness before him. She was truly lovely. In fact, she was amazing. Something in him wanted to remain on the upper deck with her, but he knew better. Virginia had been unambiguous. She always was. Candidates on this trip would need to remain totally committed to the cause, with no time for romantics with each other, or with outsiders. There was *no* middle ground. And while it was one thing to endanger his own standing within the company, it was

another to do anything that might jeopardize this young captain's position. Besides, Stone remained very well aware that he was here on Virginia's own personal invitation, and it would not do to bite the hand that fed. It was a rarity for the boss to show partiality to *any* man, let alone to allow him along on such a mission as this.

Stone felt something knot up inside him. It seemed ironic to meet a woman he found so instantly attractive and who shared his love of the ocean, only to be prevented from getting to know her better because of the nature of the trip. He pursed his lips. Mary was stunning. She was exhilarating. And he knew he had been struck hard.

"You're amazing, Captain Mary Stewart," he said honestly, words which flattered her and fanned a fire that was already well ignited within her too. "And I'm glad you're here."

He added, motioning with his eyes toward the oncoming waves. Again his statement purposefully held a double meaning, but again he let her off the hook by following it with a flippant statement. "Mind you, I do wonder what *I'm* doing here."

Mary smiled openly and Stone felt his heart race. They spoke for a while longer, enjoying each other's tales of the sea, both genuinely excited by each other's interest. Then, when his thirst would allow him to wait no longer, Stone bid her good day and strode down the ladder to find a drink below.



Stone took a long swig of Coke and gave a satisfied, if somewhat covert burp.

He rocked on his feet as the deck rolled beneath him, steadied himself and continued to walk toward the rear of the swaying lounge. Amid all the unfamiliar faces, and moreover, arch rivals at this point in time, it felt reassuring to see a friendly face, albeit, another contender. His long-time and faithful friend Katrina Redding sat with another woman and a man at a table just near the aft door, and it struck Stone that this would definitely be the best place to start.

As he approached, Katrina half rose and beckoned for him to sit. She was tall and slim, with short dark brown hair, and a wide smile that welcomed him warmly. Stone almost fell into the molded seat as the boat rocked again, and he placed his Coke on the table, checking to see if it would remain there without sliding off.

The two women sat opposite, the young man beside him, and typical of Virginia Linford's policies, they were all in their prime and among the finest looking specimens of corporate neatness

one might groom. That was the unspoken policy – pick the best society has to offer, both in intellect and in physical appearance. Virginia would always do her best to skim off, and then perfect the cream, which was what this whole trip was all about. The extra, unwritten law it appeared, was that if you couldn't sway a business deal one way, then you could resort to any other natural asset you might possess.

Both women sported straight, dark brown hair, Katrina's short and the other's long, and both were dressed as though it was simply another day at the office. Stone thought how classy they both looked, but couldn't help thinking that they had overdone the dress code for a boat ride.

The young man who sat beside Stone was, like the women, in his late twenties, maybe thirty. His face was clean and well shaven, his bright necktie and white shirt giving a professional and executive look. But the effort he had taken to make himself appear neat and professional was undermined by the sickly, almost green look of his face. Both he and the pretty, pale brunette opposite were seasick. Consequently, Katrina Redding was the only one of the trio smiling, and while she and Stone had already exchanged greetings several times that morning, she was clearly pleased to see her old friend.

"Enjoying the boat ride, John?" she asked, her face bubbling with elation.

"Sure am, Katie," he admitted with a considerable deal of enjoyment. His jovial mood brought an immediate glare from the two sickly ones, but no verbal response. Stone couldn't help but notice Katrina's effervescent face. She was positively glowing, and Stone could not help but remark on it. "So are you, by the looks of it."

Katrina continued to shine, her face a vision of joy and loveliness. She had always been a pleasant and happy person, but today she seemed far more so than usual. Stone had known her since their youth, and she had been very pleasant then too. Clearly, he thought, she was elated to have been chosen to take part in Virginia Linford's quest for a top position in the company.

Staring at her warm, smiling face, Stone wondered how he would ever be able to compete wholeheartedly against his old friend. Obviously she did not take their quest seriously enough to hold him at arm's length. On the contrary, she bubbled with an attractive cheeriness at his arrival, resting her hand on his as a further sign of their friendship. As though with pride, Katrina then took some delight in introducing Stone to her two sickly friends.

"John, this is Michelle and this is Michael. Guys, this is John Stone." She motioned with a hand to each of her friends, then explained unnecessarily as the two raised their pallid faces and shook his hand weakly in turn. "They're both feeling a little seasick."

“I’m not surprised,” replied Stone in a conciliatory tone. “It’s a rough trip.”

He eyed Katrina with interest, impressed that such short hair could look so business-like and professional and still remain so attractively feminine at the same time. At twenty-nine years of age, her face was youthful, though perhaps not so much as her sickly comrades. Something in her face gave an impression of a more mature woman, full of confidence, and despite the harsh business world in which she lived, kindness.

“I see you’re handling it okay, Katie,” he noted.

“Doesn’t bother me,” she said simply. “I guess some people it bothers and some it doesn’t. I’m just lucky. I’ll bet *you* are just loving this.”

“Yeah,” he said honestly. “You know me. Out at sea is where I’m most at home.”

It struck him as he was still speaking that Katrina displayed no sign of aloofness toward him, and this surprised him, considering Virginia’s strict warnings about fraternizing. Most of the other passengers were distant from one another, happy to be keeping to themselves, or at best, maintaining an awkward distance from each other. Virginia clearly had them all bluffed. No woman in her employ would dare show overt friendship to a fellow male employee if she aspired to climb the Linford ladder of success. Even friends felt the need to ensure that their relationship was not seen as being *too* friendly. Such a trait would surely cripple the chances of promotion within the company, and yet Katrina was clearly not inhibited by such fears. She rested her slender hand gently upon Stone’s as a true friend might while offering advice.

“Don’t tell Linford that,” she said. “The mere fact that she’s got you out here for the month means that she must think you’re a viable candidate to run one of the big three. I wouldn’t go letting her know that you’d rather be out in a boat – you’ll *never* get to be a company president *that way*.”

Stone nodded knowingly, thankful for her unnecessary warning and pleased to see the caring attitude of his old ally, even though they both knew they would be vying for the same position. He punctuated her warning with a carefully presented touch of reality.

“Especially since I’m *a man*.”

Katrina did not respond, except to turn up the corners of her lips slightly. Michael and Michelle raised their sickly faces, the brazen truth drawing a cautious and surprised look from both.

“It’s alright,” said Stone. His Coke began to slide on the table in a pool of its own condensation, and his hand stretched casually out to catch it. “I already know my chances of being one of the lucky three are pretty slim. The truth is that I kind of wonder why I’m even here at all.”

“*I know*,” answered Katrina, squeezing his hand. “It’s because you’re *good* at what you do.

That's why. Have a look around you, John. You should be like me – *glad* you made it this far. Everyone here is among the best in their fields.” She broke her train of thought to make a quick quip. “With the exception of sea travel, of course.” Then she leaned closer, as though she was sharing a secret. “And if you’re here and you’re a man – you must be *extra good*.”

She smirked, continuing to lean close to him in a pretend whisper as she made another small joke. “It just means that I’ll have to watch you all the *more closely*.”

Katrina’s eyes danced, and just for a moment Stone was surprised that he had never noticed just *how* beautiful she really was. Perhaps, he thought, their very open friendship had blinded him to the fact. He had always seen her as very attractive, but their friendship had been such a lifeline when Kim had died that he had never gotten past seeing her as just that – *a wonderful, life-saving friend*.

Despite the geographical distances that had always separated them, Katrina had remained a close and trusted friend, and Stone had never considered her in any other way. Still, her comment sounded something akin to a comment he had just said to Mary Stewart on the deck above. He could not be sure, but the thought wakened his senses so that he was forced to pay closer attention.

He was still trying to come to terms with the idea of competing against Katrina, let alone anything else. He dismissed the flash in her eyes as pure chance, and wanted to withdraw his hand from beneath hers for safety, but did not wish to hurt her. She did not raise her hand, and he felt the warmth of her soft fingers linger over his own. She was certainly unafraid, he thought.

Stone smiled to acknowledge his friend’s comments. But there was truth in her words, and they all knew it. He stared at the other swaying candidates within the lounge. Including himself and his new companions he counted ten, plus the two he had left outside hugging the rails and spitting into the tumultuous sea. Six men and six women.

It hardly seemed typical Linford. Her bias towards hiring and promoting women was almost legendary, and to see *any men* accepted as candidates for the top positions was quite surprising, let alone for men to be present in *equal numbers*. Perhaps the law of the land was finally beginning to have a balancing effect on the boss, or perhaps it was not such a surprise at all, he thought. After all, the boss certainly had shown a compassionate side to Stone after the death of his wife. Virginia had virtually ensured his rise within the company, despite the way he had faltered after Kim’s death. Perhaps she was human after all.

No, he thought, shrugging the idea off. Virginia Linford, *human*? Not likely. She was probably just including the men so that no one could later claim bias. Everyone knew that the three winners would all be women, and surely no man would stand a chance.

All the candidates were young and in the prime of their lives. All were well presented and professional, even though today, most were suffering and pale. Stone eyed his competition and wondered who the lucky ones would be.



An hour later and back on the upper deck, John Stone found Captain Mary Stewart still swaying with the swells, gripping the wheel and maneuvering the *Mermaid* into the waves to avoid unnecessary rolling. They spoke again, this time at length as Stone took advantage of the fact that she was destined to stay at the helm. Mary was a captive audience and she was happy that way. Stone found himself greatly drawn to her, and Mary was doing nothing to repel him.

“What happened to your wife?” she asked daringly. Stone was surprised by her forthright question, but welcomed her honesty and interest.

“I loved the sea. She loved the company and the power,” he explained. “We were already married when she got started at Linford’s, so the boss couldn’t argue about my presence. I think Kim always knew she would never get to the top, being *married* and all, but she lived for the company anyway. She managed to get me in there too. I was already qualified so it wasn’t such a big deal. But I’ve never known a place that was so blatantly...”

He decided to change his description of Virginia Linford’s bias toward women, realizing that Mary might read into his statement that she was only captain because she was a woman. “...difficult to work in,” he said.

Mary nodded. She knew exactly what he meant.

“Anyway, we didn’t have kids, so in our spare time I’d go sailing and... she’d go to the office. We just grew apart, I suppose. In the end she was caught abusing her privileges and doctoring the books – trying to get ahead. Linford dismissed her on the spot.”

“So she left you?” Mary’s face showed genuine concern, and Stone found himself warming to her with each passing minute.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t that simple. The company was her life – she just couldn’t handle it.” He shrugged, wondering whether Mary would either believe or care for his story. “We both had our places in the company and I always thought we’d be happy that way. *Silly me*. She was way ahead of me, of course, and I had no plans for *world domination*. But when Linford fired her, Kim just went off the rails. Kim said she hated me, hated the sea, *hated everything*. Just walked out.

“One night we all had it out – Kim, Linford and me – Linford was trying to make peace with her, I think. Kim ended up getting in our car and driving off. Linford followed her – I know I should have gone too now, but at the time there was just... *so much anger*. Anyhow, Kim drove off a cliff that night – into *the sea* of all places. How’s that for irony? Course, the police said it was probably just an accident, you know – not suicide, but...”

He shrugged, unsure of the truth, “But we’ll never know now.” He breathed heavily, still clearly bothered by the awful affair.

“The real irony is that once she was gone I had nothing left at home, so I went to work *all the more*. Linford promoted me, probably out of pity, I guess. Anyway, now here I am, competing to run one of her three parent companies. One of the *big three*. Me and all these other poor overdressed hopefuls. What do you think?”

Mary turned a soft face toward him and brushed aside her long blonde hair again. “I think I feel sorry for your wife, John. She really missed out.”

It was a blatant compliment, and showed how much she had warmed to him. Stone knew for certain that his attraction to the young captain was reciprocated, and he shivered as he felt his heart race for the first time in years. Mary looked away, concerned that perhaps she had been too forward, and she tried to justify her overt flirtation.

“And I wish you well, John. I think that you’re one of the more down-to-earth people I’ve met in this job. Specially at Linford’s.” She thought for a moment. “I do wonder, though, if you might miss the sea too much, stuck behind a desk somewhere.”

Stone read her well and replied in such a way as to continue to show his interest in her, and to lay her concerns to rest.

“Don’t worry, Mary,” he said. “I won’t ever lose my love of the ocean. If I thought a desk job was going to stop me from enjoying the *best* things in life, I’d quit in a moment.” It was not just the sea he was referring to, and she knew it. And while romance with the passengers was expressly forbidden, she could feel the undeniable fires beginning to burn within.

As the ocean began to calm, the swells eased and the *Mermaid’s* rocking became less violent. Mary’s white clothes and her long, blonde hair dried in the strong breeze. Her white knuckles began to show color again as she allowed her grip on the timber helm to ease. The effort with which she steered the vessel became more natural and easy, as did her conversation with John Stone. She knew the dangers of fraternizing with one of Virginia Linford’s executives, but couldn’t resist him.

Stone, for his part, had been captivated by the young sea captain from the moment he had

laid eyes on her, and he alternated his gaze between his beloved ocean and this vision of loveliness, a woman who shared his love of the water. He was falling for her and he knew it.

Mary laughed aloud at some of the things Stone said. He was funny and mature, and she, like he, was smitten by someone who shared a primary love of the ocean. Her white teeth flashed as she laughed at his stories and witty remarks.

She was as hooked on him as Stone was on her.

CHAPTER 3

As the passengers alighted from the *Mermaid* they were met by a lone man, a muscular and rugged figure dressed in a neat khaki uniform. His hair was pale gold, bleached by the sun, and his eyes were piercing sky blue. He was a large man, confident and rugged in appearance. Moreover, even before he spoke he exuded a clear sense of control, and while most of the women present found him attractive, he did seem almost domineering, his broad smile unable to hide the simmering need and ability to take control of his charges. On his right hip he sported a holstered automatic pistol, and he was dressed very neatly, like all of Linford's employees.

Many of the passengers were sick from their sea voyage, and sat or collapsed on their luggage, moaning in complaint about varying degrees of queasiness.

The man watched and waited, and ran his fingers through his golden-sandy hair, then held his hands aloft and waited until the group had assembled and quieted before he spoke. He seemed strong and almost menacing. When the man did speak, his voice was gravelly and terse, and full of authority.

"My name is Jo Corbett, and I am your security officer. Welcome to Valkyrie Island. I understand that you had a rough trip, but I'll ask you to take your luggage and follow me."

Without another word he turned and led the way along the pier, without ever offering to carry any of the visitors' gear. Many in the group moaned and grumbled, but none refused, and the group snaked a slow and weary path along the timber dock to dry land.

Numerous buildings sprung up within the canopy of palms just short of the northern tip of the island, a welcome sight to weary and sick travelers. The line of adventurers moved slowly, the stragglers battling to remain walking, let alone to keep up with the group. Fear, however, helped

them to overcome their desire to rest, and they managed to struggle along. It would not do to fail this most basic of Virginia Linford's tests. To be tardy would be unforgivable.

John Stone waved a subtle farewell to Mary Stewart and set off at the rear of the pack, taking not only his own baggage, but much of Michelle's too. She swayed and moaned, but struggled valiantly to remain upright and moving.

"I feel so sick," she groaned, her face deathly pale. "I think I'm going to die."

"You'll be fine now," replied Stone supportively, and with Katrina's help, Michelle struggled along with the group.

Not hindered by sickness, Stone was able to take in the beauty of Valkyrie Island. It was lush and green, and apparently mostly flat, but without further investigation it would be impossible to tell just how big the island was. What *was* visible was idyllic. Numerous coconut palms rose high into the afternoon sky, and the surrounding ocean was clean and blue. Away to the south the land rose a little, offering the only visible high point on the landscape.

The dock was not quite on the northern tip of the island, but was about two hundred meters from it along the eastern shore, and it struck Stone as strange not to have built the dock on the more sheltered western side of the island. But logic dictated that perhaps the reasoning had been to secure a deeper mooring place for Linford's ocean-going *Mermaid*. Stone quickly dismissed the logistical deliberations as meaningless. Instead, he tried to enjoy the beauty of the place.

Despite the tropical surroundings though, even Stone was pleased to see the array of buildings before them. Buildings meant showers, sleeping quarters and comfort. Though not seasick, he was still tired from the long, rough trip.

As the group meandered slowly between the first of the structures they were met by three more island dwellers. Three women moved from one of the buildings and stood in the open, waiting until the group met up with them. Without a word being spoken the tired travelers relaxed and lowered their bags to the ground, though none sat.

The tallest of the women was perhaps in her mid forties or maybe fifty, and sported long, dark brown hair. She was dressed immaculately, wearing stylish and expensive slacks and a matching blouse and shoes. A woman with long golden hair carried a clipboard and stayed close to the first woman, staring long and hard at the sickly and tired candidates. She had the potential to be quite pretty, but the lack of a smile gave her a more foreboding appearance. She was younger than the tallest one by perhaps ten years, Stone estimated, and clearly very much intent on maintaining order and control.

The shortest of the women was younger again, perhaps barely thirty. She had short mid-brown hair and a large pair of plastic rimmed glasses that gave her an added air of intelligence. She did not smile, but her face was sharp and alert. All three were dressed in slacks, neatly pressed and very well presented, in somewhat of a contrast to the battered appearance of the new arrivals. An infectious hush fell over the group, and Michelle, while wanting to speculate with Katrina as to whom these women might be, thought better of it and remained silent.

She was glad she did as the oldest, dark haired woman began to speak.

“I understand that you had a turbulent voyage, so I wanted to take the opportunity to welcome you *personally* to my island. I’m glad to see you all here.”

The tall woman smiled as she eyed the group with some apparent happiness, like someone gloating over a new purchase. Her voice sounded amicable, and yet she retained an air of control and aloofness. Michelle swallowed in awe of the mentor she had never met as the boss went on.

“My name, for those who I’ve not met yet, is Virginia Linford.”



Virginia Linford smiled briefly at the end of her welcoming speech, and John Stone couldn’t help but feel that it was a deceptive gesture. The truth was that lurking beneath Linford’s friendly façade was a prowling beast – one he had encountered personally on occasion.

Beneath the thin veil of warm welcoming lurked a brutal, harsh side, and those present knew they would have to give their *all* to impress this woman – and that she, in the end, would show no compassion. She was a tough businesswoman – something of a lioness in the business world, and most certainly in the fashion world. Not a single candidate present would have vied for the prestigious prize of running one of her companies without knowing that Virginia would expect and demand *everything* from them. Only the strongest and brightest would succeed.

“And, now that I’ve welcomed you to your new training center, I’ll hand over to my personal assistant, Miss Debra Birch.” Virginia Linford gestured as the golden haired girl stepped up beside her boss, clipboard in hand.

The golden girl waited in silence as her boss turned and strode away, leaving the details to her underlings. While perhaps not quite as imposing as Virginia, Debra Birch clearly carried the blessing and authority of her employer, and this alone gave power to her otherwise calm voice.

“My name is Debra, and I too welcome you,” she began. “Before I tell you where your

rooms are and who you'll be rooming with, I must set out some basic rules. Please, listen carefully to what I have to say. Valkyrie is a testing ground for you, and you'll need to heed the rules if you are to succeed.

"I'm sure you already know that any breach of the rules will result in your failure and immediate expulsion from the island, and you will be expected to observe these rules to the letter. Your future both here and in the real world will depend on it." Her threat could not help but capture their attention, and showed the same cold hardness lurking just beneath the smiling façade that the group had seen in Virginia Linford.

"As you know, you'll be here for a month," she continued. "In that time you'll be both trained and tested. At the end of that time three most successful candidates will go on to be company heads. *This* is how Virginia has opted to choose her best people, so I suggest you *strive to do your best*. Think of it as boot camp, if you want. Your every effort is to your own advantage."

Debra flicked her long golden hair, then nodded toward the small woman at her side with the plastic-rimmed glasses.

"This is Penny White," Debra explained. "Penny will be your academic teacher. She has degrees in business and corporate management, as well as considerable experience in our head offices. You will be expected to attend *all* of Penny's classes, without exception. *I* will be your physical trainer. Each day will begin with a seven-kilometer jog around the island. Part of your training will be simple fitness, and again, there will be *no exceptions*."

She nodded toward the surly security man. "This is Jo Corbett. Jo is your security chief. He is responsible for your safety. Girls, there will be *no fraternizing* with Jo."

The corners of Jo Corbett's mouth turned up with the smallest hint of a smile. Without drawing a breath, Debra flashed her eyes over the crowd and continued her warnings.

"And to all, *any fraternizing* with each other will result in *immediate dismissal* from the program, and expulsion from the island. If you fraternize, you are detracting not only from your own efforts, but from someone else's. We expect your *full* concentration. You may of course speak to each other, but you may *not* go further. *Not* with the staff, and *certainly not* with each other. Your private lives may be your own, but your time here is expensive, and any breach of the rules may put others at risk, not just yourself. Therefore, any breaches will be taken *very* seriously. You are professionals. *Please act as such*. Miss Linford is very clear on this, and *no* lenience will be shown."

Debra's demeanor seemed unduly hard as she spoke, and it struck Stone as a pity that such a

pretty woman should feel it necessary to put on such a stern face. She continued her warnings, driving home her point.

“Getting involved distracts you and detracts from what you are here for, and ultimately, from your performance in the world. The rationale is that if you cannot be trusted in this matter, then you cannot be trusted to control a Linford company. We’re here to find out who is the best, and who will give *undivided attention* to the task of running the business at hand. *Nothing else*. On this point I cannot be more clear.”

The group remained silent, and Stone felt a small sigh of anguish pass from his chest as he thought of Captain Mary Stewart. Debra Birch continued with her list of rules, and the warnings that accompanied them.

“*The island*. We are now on the northern tip of Valkyrie Island. Valkyrie is four kilometers long and one and a half kilometers wide. There are buildings at both this end, and near the south-eastern tip. The roads, however, only cover the northern half of the island. This is the *main camp*. The second camp is only basic, and is only used for exercises. When the war-games begin later in the program, we’ll use the south-eastern camp a little then.”

A silent groan passed through the small crowd, tired and sickly bodies rejecting the prospect of war-games and more suffering. Debra Birch gave no opportunity for complaint, not hesitating as she continued her list of rules.

“As you can see, we are surrounded by some very beautiful ocean. However, don’t be deceived. These waters are heavily infested with sharks, and swimming in the sea is *strictly forbidden*. You can feel free to *walk* anywhere on the island and to use any of the beaches, but *don’t swim* there. Any breach of this rule, should you survive the sharks, will result in your being sent home.”

She paused for effect, then made a comment that made some of those present wonder whether or not it was really humor. “That’s if Virginia doesn’t throw you back and feed you to the sharks for breaking her rules.” Somehow the warning came as no surprise.

Debra smiled, again displaying a deceptive façade of friendliness.

“Not *all* your time here is meant to be tough. When you are not in classes, your time will be your own. Then you may roam the island as you wish. It’s beautiful. *Enjoy it*. There is one exception though. Across from the south-eastern camp is a very small island. For the sake of the forgetful, we call it *Tiny Island*. You’ll know it when you see it, and I must tell you now that it too is *strictly off limits*.

“For those foolish enough to try to walk to it at low tide, there are oysters and poisonous fish in the shallows, and you should not place yourselves in harm’s way. The only other way to get to Tiny Island would be to swim, and as you have *already* been told – you may *not swim* in the waters around Valkyrie. Remember, Linford Industries is paying a lot of money to have you here, so please don’t place yourself in harm’s way.”

Debra looked about her as if to see that all present understood the gravity of her warning. “So, stay away from Tiny Island and we’ll all get along just fine. The *rest* of Valkyrie is yours to enjoy. And it might be pertinent at this time to point out that Virginia wants to observe you at rest as well as at work.”

Her tone softened and then hardened in a moment as she delivered the expected and inevitable warning. “Please enjoy – but just remember the rules on fraternizing.”

She stared at her clipboard.

“When I allot your rooms and room-mates, I must tell you that the decision is final. *Do not* ask to be moved. You will be observed on how you function as part of a team, as well as how you function alone. And again, we will be placing men with men and women with women. I don’t need to tell you that anyone who takes it upon him or her self to interpret these rules their *own way* will be sent home. You didn’t come here to fail, so please heed the rules, people.”

Having emphasized Virginia’s demands, Debra put on a hard face once more to ensure she received no argument to her next ultimatum.

“And I must ask one more thing. We are here in the middle of the ocean to observe you in undisturbed surroundings. That’s part of the reason we have Jo Corbett here. Part of his job will be to make sure you all remain isolated completely from the outside world. *No one* visits this island. You are purposely placed here for *that reason*. This means that, until the end of training, you must hand over all cell phones, radios and weapons of any kind. There can be *no exceptions!* Jo will take them from you after I have allotted you your rooms.”

A few surprised looks from the group members were met with a stern gaze from the golden girl, who stared down all objections. Most of those present still toted their cell phones, which were as much a part of their attire as their neat, expensive clothing. And while most felt almost naked without the devices, each handed them over without fuss. Jo Corbett gathered up all the phones and placed them in plastic packets he had come prepared with. Several cans of Mace were also tossed into the bags, though no weapons were counted among the candidates’ possessions.

“Stop worrying,” Debra assured, as downcast, exhausted candidates dropped their cell phones

into a packet. “Those wouldn’t work out here anyway. It’s just the rules, that’s all.”

It seemed little comfort to a group whose members were tired, and many of whom were feeling quite sick. Out of range their phones may have been, but there was a definite mental barrier that accompanied surrendering their last hope of contact with the outside world.

After that the candidates were ushered in pairs to their rooms. As they parted, Stone heard Michelle groan again, her sickly body straining to remain upright as she trudged toward her room.

“I’m going to die,” she moaned, her eyes studying her feet as she trudged. “I feel so sick. *We’re all going to die*, I just know it.”

CHAPTER 4

DAY 2

Debra Birch set a relaxed pace as she led the group around the only sealed road on the island. Her long golden hair was tied back in a ponytail that bounced with each sprightly pace, and the runners behind set their course to dutifully follow.

Sunbeams penetrated the palms and other trees as the panting crew of candidates followed their leader, and a thin layer of dew was already evaporating where the sunshine warmed the grass. It was early spring, and what little of winter had invaded Valkyrie still hung gently in the air, the occasional breeze proving chilly and refreshing to the sweating runners.

The group took in their surroundings as well as each other as they ran. No one spoke, opting rather to play follow-the-leader like good students, and not to anger Debra on their first day. Stone allowed himself to drift toward the rear of the pack so that he could take a long look at the competition. He had used meal times to meet his rivals, and it seemed wise to study them at every opportunity. Any edge he could gain over them could only prove beneficial.

His roommate Nick Tanner jogged out in front, close to Debra. Nick was a tall, lean man of thirty-something years, with an attitude that jumped out and bit those he met. His hair was pale, almost blonde, full of waves and very neatly groomed, and his face was quite handsome. In the little time Stone had spent with him, he already perceived that Nick was a keen rival who would fight to win at any cost. Nick’s attitude bordered on bitter, and he saw everyone as a potential enemy.

Stone had little doubt that the women present probably considered Nick quite a catch, but that

his attitude would surely keep them at bay. Besides, there were always Virginia's rules to be considered. Nick would need to be carefully watched, and Stone knew that Nick's mix of talent and toughness would make him a worthy opponent.

Jennifer Walsh ran close to Nick. "*Just Jenny*" as she described herself, was polite and particularly bright. Jenny's short blonde hair and metal-rimmed glasses served a similar effect as did Penny White's. Like the academic trainer's, Jenny's glasses seemed to accentuate the intelligence of the thirty-two year old, giving her an imposing aura of academic prowess that more than compensated for her quiet demeanor. As might be expected from anyone selected to take part in the test, Jenny exhibited a deep and quiet confidence, which would clearly prove a powerful and necessary asset in leadership.

Jenny's friend Linda ran beside her. Linda was of Italian extract, her long dark hair and olive skin complimenting her strong Italian accent. While obviously possessing a keen business mind, Linda lacked the same poise and style of Jenny and Katrina, and Stone wondered how she had made it to this final testing ground. Perhaps Linda was an exception to the expectations one might have for candidates.

Tony and Peter followed behind them. The two men were both in their mid thirties and clearly were friends. Like the rest of their fellow candidates, they were both very bright, but seemed to mix their time between statements that showed great intelligence, and acts of crude humor. Stone had no doubt that the two followed directly behind Jenny and Linda for the sole purpose of ogling them.

Like all those present, they represented a mix of intellect as well as raw physical prowess. Both men were handsome in appearance and quite fit. Tony especially, could have pursued a career as a male model, had his time at Linford's not been so successful. The two men's eccentric mix of brilliance and crudeness was, it seemed to Stone, a healthy balance, and one he respected and understood. Doubtless though, it would not impress Virginia Linford in the final cut.

Erin Brown jogged alone. She had eaten alone, barely spoken at mealtimes, and she seemed to be purposely remaining as distant from the group as possible. Her brown skin matched her name, and Stone thought how strong a personality she exuded. There was considerable depth to Erin. While not overtly rude, she was distant and self reliant, and on the surface, quite cold. She held the others at a distance, surviving alone. Erin would doubtlessly prove tough and intensely competitive.

Brice and Sandra followed Erin. They were clearly old acquaintances, and the two spent much of their time together. While always careful not to be seen as anything more than friendly

colleagues, Stone couldn't help but wonder if their friendship might cost them dearly. They were both just past their mid twenties, another factor which made Stone wonder about their suitability as candidates.

It made no sense to him. Virginia's bias toward youth and beauty was well known, but such youth seemed to leave little room for experience or wisdom. Still, in a strange, twisted way, perhaps it did make sense. After all, her candidates were all brilliant, excellent in their respective business fields, and being so young, perhaps the boss saw them as flexible and therefore teachable – people she could mould in her own tough image. Stone shivered at the thought. After all, he was a candidate too.

Beside Stone jogged Katrina and Michelle. Katrina had set out further toward the front of the pack, but had dropped back to silently join Stone at the rear, and Michelle had soon followed. Katrina's short cropped hair barely moved as she trotted, and Stone remembered how unaffected her hair had been during the boat trip, even with the strong ocean wind and spray. Her styling sense seemed very logical to him.

Just like she had done yesterday, Katrina beamed with a smile she could not hide. Her happiness at being on Valkyrie Island was remarkably obvious, her face bubbling with joy even more than her exuberant personality would normally allow.

Color had returned to Michelle's face, and today she looked fit and well, jogging effortlessly. She was somewhat shy and so far had remained close to Katrina at most times. Again, it did not strike Stone as a trait of one of Virginia's top executives. Still, if the past few years had taught Stone anything, it was not to underestimate a person, or to judge their character too quickly. He did not doubt Michelle's business abilities, and therefore suspected that she would have other strengths too.

The group had begun their run in a clockwise direction around Valkyrie, following the sealed road as it meandered between the coconut palms on the eastern side of the island. White beaches were broken occasionally by outcrops of rugged, black boulders that jutted out into the waves, shattering the white caps and sending showers of spray and froth into the air. The dull roar made a pleasant change from the constant pace and sounds of the cities in which the candidates lived, and they all took great pleasure in the beauty of their temporary home.

Half way along the length of the island the road turned sharply inland and cut another wandering path through the trees. Coconut palms changed to native trees and thick bushes, tall grasses and dark green hanging vines. While not impenetrable, the forest thickened considerably, broken only rarely by small gaps in the thick growth. On the runners' left the forest stretched like a

green barrier to the south, while on their right the trees had been selectively cleared all the way to the main camp, and short, mown green grass stretched, glistening with morning dew.

The quiet purr of an engine alerted the group to the approach of a vehicle, and Debra led them to the side of the road. They ceased jogging at Debra's silent example and milled about, panting and waiting as Jo Corbett brought an open-topped Jeep to a halt beside the golden-girl. Seated beside Jo was a younger man, also dressed in Khaki. Stone guessed him to be not much older than twenty, and both men nodded their heads in greeting to Debra.

"Everything okay?" asked Jo. He knew the answer before he asked, but cordiality and conscientious discharge of duty demanded that he ask.

"Fine, Jo, thank you."

Debra's answer was short and to the point, and it was all the security chief needed to make him nod and drive on. The group watched as the Jeep droned off between the trees and was gone. Debra then spoke in stern and unambiguous tones.

"The younger man is Jeff King. And for the women present – yes, he's very cute." She ran her eyes especially over the six females present, and lowered her face so as to stare almost through her eyebrows to punctuate the seriousness of her warning. "And if you are seen *anywhere near* him for any reason other than with a security question, you're out of here. I know you shouldn't have to hear this, so this will be the last time I'll tell you. *Don't be tempted, ladies!* It'll cost you your place here."

In the absence of any reply, she pointed back in the direction of the ocean. "And again, I know the waves look inviting, but remember the sharks *and remember the rules*, and stay out of there."

Her arm pivoted and she pointed toward the southern end of Valkyrie. The other camp is two kilometers along the eastern shore, and the war-games will be played south of this road, in this forest. At the southern end of the island is a cliff. *So be careful!* When you come out of the brush, the drop-off is right in front of you, forty meters straight down! So *remember it* and be very careful. If you fall, *you're dead!* *No one* will be going down after you, because the sharks will have eaten whatever is left by the time help arrives."

She waited, almost daring anyone to question her.

"When we get around to the western side of the island, you'll find the water is much calmer. But remember the warnings about the sharks – *and the rules*. It's still dangerous, even though it's calm. You can walk or sun bake there in your own time, but that is all."

Again, in the absence of any sound, she continued.

“Where we stand here is just a little over half way along the island from the main camp, and the road is exactly seven kilometers around. We’re in the sub-tropics, so beware of spiders and other biting insects. The good news is that there are no snakes. Any questions?”

She was brusque and direct, and since no one felt it prudent to ask trivialities, all remained silent. The group then dutifully followed as Debra led the way westward to the leeward side of Valkyrie.

Just as they had been told, the island was just a kilometer and a half across, and it was not long before the sealed road turned abruptly to the right again, following the coast in a northerly direction back toward the main camp. Debra led the group of lightly sweating runners along the narrow road as they took in the western side of Valkyrie. It was grassier than the exposed sandy coast to the east, and shadier too. For the most part the waters were green and less choppy, and often the lush trees came right down to the water’s edge, offering a shady alternative for those who wished to escape the tropical sun. Occasional bays and points revealed small white sandy beaches, and the rocky spits characteristic of the eastern side were absent.

To the candidates, mindful of the rigors that lay ahead of them, these quiet places offered the promise of serene and peaceful places in which to escape in the future.



Penny White shifted her glasses about on her elfin face and waited for an answer.

The first brave soul to venture an opinion was Linda, who waited in the eerie silence, and then threw caution to the wind with a simple, “I’d go for safety.”

“You’d go for safety?” Penny questioned Linda’s answer, and the words reverberated threateningly within the room. Before the terse reprimand even began, Linda knew she’d given the wrong response. Penny was ruthless.

“You’d wait until the company was in a position where it could lose so much, and then you’d play for what you could salvage?” Penny’s elfin face began to harden in a moment.

“That’s right,” snapped back Linda in a desperate bid to appear both confident and competent, and to save herself. “The only guarantee is that you could keep the company in a safe position with that action, and for the time being, safety would be my *primary* concern.”

It sounded strong, but everyone in the room knew she was about to be scolded.

Penny's harmless demeanor continued to dissolve, and she quickly metamorphosed into a snarling wildcat. She tore into Linda, launching a bitter attack on her suggested course of action, belittling her before her colleagues. Linda's olive skin grew red with anger and shame as she felt the eyes of her fellow candidates upon her. But she remained focused on Penny, enduring the tirade, and when it was over, she defended herself again.

"It's a hypothetical situation!" she insisted indignantly. "You can't be *sure* it would work out *your* way. *My* course of action might prove the best one, and *you* can only assume otherwise!" Her voice rose in both volume and pitch as she reacted to Penny's onslaught. In a moment the teacher returned to her former self, soft and calm, and she spoke quietly to the entire group.

"First things first, candidates," she said simply. "You've just been reminded of the first rule of engagement of the enemy. Be in control! Linda's answer tells me that she was not. She allowed herself to be emotionally drawn by my response. This weakened her position. But more importantly, Linda, the situation was *not* hypothetical."

Penny glanced to one side of the room where Virginia Linford and Debra Birch sat taking in the morning's lesson and the candidates' responses. A tiny nod from the boss and Penny knew she had permission to continue. She lowered her voice to a whisper.

"It just so happens that our newest Japanese section took a cataclysmic dive this past month because of Linda's *exact* decision in those same circumstances. Our manager there opted to salvage what she could, and those people *ate her alive*. You have to remember the culture of the countries that you are dealing with, Linda. Leading business is tough enough. For a *woman* it's even tougher, and in a culture that sees salvage as weakness, its suicide.

"That loss has severely weakened our position in the eyes of the Japanese, and this is *not acceptable*. More losses of that nature and we'll find ourselves losing our edge as world stage leaders." The severity of the news having been passed on, Penny scolded Linda one final time before she searched the eyes of the remaining candidates.

"Most disappointing for now, is that Linda should – you *all* should, be intimately familiar with major Linford industry events such as this, even if it *was* very recent. This is not pleasing. Any other suggestions?"

The mood in the room was heavy, and no one relished the prospect of being the next candidate to be brought crashing down in shame, least of all in front of Virginia Linford. But something within John Stone wouldn't allow him to remain silent. Despite his own silent realization that he had not known of the business problems in Japan, he was certain he could see a better

answer.

“So you call their bluff and ride it out,” he offered bluntly, and without invitation he added some thoughts to qualify his opinion. He quickly offered some risky, though clever financial alternatives before Penny could interrupt, and then summed up his scheme.

“Even if you sustain losses,” he ventured, “you make the Japanese a little less likely to try a similar stunt later. Image and perception are everything, especially in a society like Japan’s. When you don’t have absolute power, and in this case Linford Industries didn’t, it would have proven better to make them afraid of your potential, rather than to merely attempt to maintain the status quo. Put simply – give them a fight they won’t forget – a few scratches. Regardless of the outcome, they won’t be in such a hurry to take you on next time. Even if you lose, you win.”

Penny stared hard into his eyes, and for a while he thought he too would bear the hidden barbs of her vitriolic tongue. Then her face softened, and she nodded her agreement.

“Image and perception are everything if you don’t have absolute power. I like that,” she said.

Stone felt a deep, silent sigh pass from his chest as he realized his answer had pleased both the teacher and the management. His rise to popularity was short lived however, as Penny made a swipe at his offer.

“Very good, John Stone. But of course, you spoke with the knowledge that Linda’s idea had already failed.”

Stone shrugged off her negativity, happy to have taken the attention off Linda, who was smarting from the bitter onslaught she had endured. Still, it irked him when Penny did her best a moment later to run him down.

“So just how smart *was* your idea, really?” she asked.

CHAPTER 5

DAY 3

The morning routine started out exactly as the previous day. The jog around the island had been without a break this time, and after such rigorous academic training the day before, many in the group were already looking longingly at the many private and beautiful sandy inlets and beaches the

island had to offer.

In truth, anything that would allow them to escape the ire of Penny White seemed like an attractive alternative.

Stone had greatly appreciated a wonderfully cooked breakfast, having worked up a considerable appetite. He wondered if the salt air was having an effect on him. The group had met the cook, Anna Smart. Anna was forty-five years of age. Everyone knew this because she had openly told them, when given her chance to address the candidates. She wore a white uniform, pressed neatly, and while not overweight, she was beginning to show signs that controlling her figure was becoming more difficult.

She sported a most beautiful and genuine smile, and Stone thought what a pleasant person she was. Anna was wearying, however, the wrinkles around her eyes hinting at the tiredness she felt, and Stone thought that she would have done better to have left her shoulder-length hair the natural brown it was instead of the peroxide blonde she had made it. And yet, somehow, this unsophisticated and lowly woman had easily held the group in her simple, unassuming hands. She didn't have their education or their power. She would never affect the world as they might, and yet she possessed a certain contentment, and a definite spark to be envied.

Anna had completed her humble welcome-speech by calling upon her two assistants to stand with her, and then thanking them. The two young women were not much more than school leaving age, and Stone guessed them to be in their late teens. They were unsure of themselves and unrefined like Anna, with a touch of brash youthfulness, and were most certainly unsure of how to handle the unwanted attention they received.

Anna, in her humble way, poured most of the credit upon her two young underlings. They were merely assistants who tended to cooking and cleaning at the direction of their superior, and lacked both the drive and the opportunity to warrant such attention, and yet Anna had insisted on seeing that they receive equal, or rather, greater appreciation.

She had showed pride for the first and only time as she introduced one of the girls as her daughter, Kirsty. The other girl was Meagan. And just as soon as they were able, both assistants had disappeared back into the kitchen, clearly not feeling comfortable with the unwanted attention.

Virginia Linford had watched closely as Anna Smart made her speech, carefully noting how each candidate reacted to the amicable cook. It seemed very important to the boss to see how the candidates handled interacting with a woman who was clearly not in their own class. Stone wondered silently how anyone could receive the cook with anything but open arms, being as friendly

and pleasant as she was.

Besides, he thought, she could cook like no one he had ever known.

After exercises and showers came more business training sessions, and again the group saw the placid Penny White metamorphose into a fiery dragon at the hint of a poor answer or a less than well-considered assumption. She shot candidates down without mercy, burning them alive in front of Virginia Linford. Few escaped her acid tongue. Only Stone, his roommate Nick Tanner, and Jenny Walsh seemed to possess the good fortune to stay out of the way of her blistering tirades. Stone began to wonder if it was perhaps a matter of possessing a proper sense of timing rather than always knowing the correct answers which kept him out of trouble.

When the long hours of training were over, the group took a late lunch, and candidates were then informed by Virginia Linford that the afternoon was their own. They were free to wander the island at will, *within the rules, of course*.



Stone set a brisk pace that quickly brought him to where the sealed road turned inland at the western coast. He had passed many of his fellow candidates on the way, but none ventured further than the cleared, northern end of the island.

Most still wore their business clothes to varying degrees, unsure whether to dress casually would *really* be tolerated. It seemed a waste to be at such beautiful, sandy beaches and not be dressed for the occasion, but few dared to take full advantage of their setting. To do so at this early stage of their course, despite Virginia Linford's invitation, seemed to hold unknown risks. In truth, many were still reeling from the intensity of the training sessions, and had not fully emerged from the depths to which they had been interred to properly relax.

Just Linda, Tony and Peter ventured to dress for the beach. Stone passed them as they lay on towels in a sandy bay on the leeward side of the island, the men dressed in swim-shorts and Linda in high-cut green bikinis, which she filled amply. When he saw the sight of such an attractive woman and two men lying side by side on a secluded beach, it struck Stone that Linford's eyes, or perhaps those of her spies, would probably not be far away. He doubted that Virginia Linford would approve.

Still, perhaps the boss would be more interested in their conversations than their attire. He wondered. He had greeted the three briefly as he passed, and knew that he had interrupted a

complaint session about the intensity of the lessons. Each of the three had been filling Penny White's back with daggers.

Dressed in shorts, a t-shirt and running shoes, and with a borrowed kitchen waterbottle in hand, Stone strode quickly, guessing that the island could only be about eleven kilometers around and that he could explore the entire coastline before the evening meal as long as he did not waste time.

The going became slower once he passed the sealed road, but not so much that it made him afraid of missing the meal. He walked with purpose, taking in as best he could the incredible beauty and peacefulness of Valkyrie, with its many inlets and sandy spits, and the green and blue waters that gently lapped the western shore.

A feeling of great relief washed over him, and he felt a burden lift from his body and mind as he strode. He wondered how he was faring in Virginia Linford's eyes. She was not one to give away any signs, but Stone had little doubt. Strange as it was to think that her legendary prejudice might be mellowing, she had seemed impressed by his efforts so far. And why not? He had excelled.

After half an hour, Stone could see the coastline ahead beginning to veer to the left, eastward, and he knew that he was nearing the southern tip of the island. Still the water was calm and for the most part, the island was pleasantly quiet. Only an occasional bird rustled in the trees overhead, and small waves splashed on the white sands.

Rounding a bend, he emerged through dense tree cover to find a picturesque bay unfold before him. Its waters were calm and deep green, and it was well hidden on all sides by dense vegetation. More importantly, though, was that as he approached, Stone could see the familiar, white stern of the *Mermaid* slowly slipping away to the south.

Stone's heart skipped at the thought of seeing Mary again, and before he could think he found himself running along the short stretch of white sand into the deepest part of the bay. He waved wildly, calling to the boat's captain, hoping desperately that she might glance back and see him. He could see her small, white-clad figure standing on the upper deck, navigating her way out of the bay.

"No!" he cursed. And then he stopped waving.

Mary had been in his thoughts constantly since the boat ride to Valkyrie, and his impromptu reaction only served to cement in his mind just how infatuated he was with her. He shivered at the thought. Not since his wife had become so violently estranged, sprouting words of hatred and

malice, had he allowed himself to think romantically about a woman. He stood in silent contemplation as he realized his defenses were beginning to fall.

After watching mournfully as the *Mermaid* slipped silently out of sight to the south, he looked at the smooth sand around him. A smudged drag mark showed clearly where a small rubber dinghy had been pulled up the sand not far from where he stood. Leading from it was a single set of small footprints that meandered back and forth on the sand, and a short distance away was another smudged indent in the sand. Stone studied the scene for a time, and then cursed quietly again. Mary had been right there, in the bay. She had come ashore in this hidden oasis of privacy, placed a towel on the sand and laid on it. His heart pounded.

He struggled with the thought of her, trying to picture what she might have looked like, away from prying eyes and formality – natural and lovely. He yearned to speak with her again, and rued the fact that he had not arrived just a few minutes earlier. And even if his feelings were no more than simple infatuation and desire, he could have spent precious time discovering the truth of his feelings for her. He ached.

Sitting with his head resting on his knees, he waited for a while, hoping fervently that the *Mermaid* might enter the bay again. But it did not. And then he realized the need for haste. As much as he ached to speak with Mary, she was not here, and sitting brooding about it would not get him back to the main camp by nightfall.



Sandy beaches turned to rocky hills at the southern tip of Valkyrie, and Stone began to pant with the effort of the climb. It would not have been so difficult for him had there not been such a time pressure. He felt the first easing of the afternoon heat as he guessed that he was at the furthest point from the main camp. The prospect of facing Virginia Linford's ire for being late was motive enough to maintain the pace, and the thought of missing one of Anna Smart's meals gave added impetus. He'd didn't want to be late.

Finally he found himself at the highest point, at the very southern tip, and as he stared about him, he realized that Debra Birch had not overstated the dangers concerning the cliffs. Thick brush and trees covered the entire landscape almost right to the edge, cut short by a narrow headland most of the way along the edge of the vertical drop. It was as though the headland was man-made, but Stone could not imagine how such a thing could have been done. A person walking too fast, or

perhaps in the dark could easily walk out of the forest and drop to their death.

He moved cautiously toward the edge and peered over. The wind was strong on the exposed eastern side of the island, on to which the waves and winds predominantly blew. Because of the rushing wind and the surging, boiling waters of the ocean, there came a constant and awesome roar from below. The white waters crashed and smashed themselves against the vertical rocky face, snarling angrily and tumbling repeatedly, seeking something to destroy or devour.

Stone, a long time seafarer, was surprised by the ferocity and violence of the pounding waves, and realized that everything Debra had said was true. Should a person drop over *that* edge, they would most certainly not survive. And moreover, so perilous would such a misfortune be that there would surely be nothing to be gained by sending over a rescue party. Add the possibility of sharks, and a person's fate would be beyond doubt.

Stone withdrew carefully from the edge and moved on. He began striding northward, following the eastern coast back toward the main camp. Less than a half a kilometer on he was forced to veer inland by a deep inlet, just where the rocky coast gave way to a sandy beach. The inlet continued, eventually revealing its true identity, a surging saltwater channel that actually cut off a small part of Valkyrie from the rest, and then vented back into the sea further to the north.

The channel waters were only perhaps thirty meters across, but they raged back and forth, swirling and frothing as though unsure which way they were supposed to travel, both ends of the short river-like tract being fed by the same stretch of ocean.

The swirling channel cut its way through sand and rock, leaving two opposing beaches; the one upon which Stone stood and the one that was part of the tiny annexed island. The portion of land cut off by the swirling torrent was not more than a hundred meters long, and was covered mostly by long grasses and a band of thick, tall trees running down its center. It was bordered on all sides by a narrow band of white sand and effectively cut off from the main island by the treacherous channel of swirling water.

Stone mentally pictured Debra Birch's welcome speech to the candidates on their first afternoon on Valkyrie, and in particular, her mention of *Tiny Island*. He remembered too her strict instructions about not venturing across to it. Like the treacherousness of the cliff face, she had not exaggerated the dangers of the channel.

A shark fin surfaced and then disappeared as if on cue as a reminder of the dangers Debra Birch had warned about. The menacing creature's presence made the thirty-meter swim seem impossible, or at the very least, a particularly daunting prospect. Tiny Island looked as though it

might have made a good hiding place during the war-games, and he regretted that it was not an option.

So many rules, he thought.

Turning to leave, Stone glanced northward on the main island and was surprised to see several small huts nestled within the trees. In his haste to investigate Tiny Island he had not noticed the rough structures. He moved hastily toward them, noting that there were five timber and corrugated iron huts, each with walls painted in olive, causing them to blend in with their shaded surroundings. The small huts were huddled closely together, and the tiny hamlet was quiet and peaceful.

Stone ventured to open the door of one of the huts, daring to guess that they were very much uninhabited. His hunch proved correct, and all he found was empty metal-framed bunks with thin mattresses and musty pillows. He remembered the talk about a second camp from which war-games would be staged, and knew that he had found it. While he would like to have nosed around some more, he was becoming very mindful of the time, and thought better of it. There would be other occasions.

He set off again, keeping to the coast, the rocky shore having given way to a continuous stretch of clean, white sand. He was forced to halt his advance soon after, however, not because of water or rock, but because of dense vegetation. A wall of trees and twisted mangrove roots came down all the way into the sea, forming an impenetrable barrier, and he knew he would be forced to either swim or turn inland. Doubting that his clothes would dry sufficiently by the time he reached the main camp, he opted to walk.

As he strode quickly inland through the trees and shrubs, he then crossed a small stream that wound its way through the cool, quiet forest. He followed it for a time and found that it soon turned and weaved its way parallel to the coast. Just two meters wide and barely ankle deep, it was more of a trickle than a stream. The water was clear and clean and moved slowly, and Stone stopped to taste it. To his surprise and satisfaction the water was fresh and sweet. He was easily able to follow the clear, babbling stream until it reached a rocky pool fifty meters further on.

The sparkling, fresh pool was five meters across and perhaps just a meter deep, and vented its precious excess water in a tiny trickle on two sides, keeping it clean and unspoiled by algae or other growth. Stone tasted the water again, and was pleased to find that the source was even more clean and drinkable than the stream that flowed from it. Again he had stumbled upon something that might prove valuable later, and it struck him that it would be a good asset to remember during the

war-games, whatever *they might be*.

He glanced at his watch. Time was becoming an enemy. If he did not keep moving he would risk upsetting management. His feelings for Mary Stewart rose in his heart again, and he found himself dealing with a new dilemma as he strode onward. Having finally discovered that he could still find a woman attractive, and that the scars left by his late wife might actually heal sufficiently to allow him to move on, suddenly he found himself viewing his executive aspirations in a new light.

Mary was young and exciting, and if she offered to sail away right now, Stone would lift the anchor himself. It was a new, refreshing and invigorating thought. But there was a problem. If he allowed himself the luxury of fraternizing with Mary, and didn't remain committed to Linford's course, he would certainly be expelled, and then he would lose his opportunity to see Mary at all. The irony ate at him. Even worse, he was not sure just how serious he could be about her. Was his love simply infatuation?

Mary caused him pain.

Breaking out of the trees and back on the eastern shore he set a brisk pace, occasionally glancing at his watch as the shadows began to solidify into a single entity and spill across the shimmering sand. As the sun began to hide among the treetops, a new coolness settled over Stone, as much from apprehension as from the cool of evening. It was almost 5:30 when he reached the shorter grasses and sealed road of the developed northern end of Valkyrie, and by now his sprightly pace was interwoven with bursts of jogging. Fears began to form in his mind, and then anger and indignation.

They were adults, and yet they were being treated like children. *Follow the rules or be sent home! Follow the stupid rules!*

Stone silently cursed them as he jogged, more afraid of the legacies of failing than of facing Virginia Linford's ire. Mary had seemed so interested. He *had* to remain focused to have any chance with Mary. He set his mind to the task, the sweat beginning to stick his shirt to his back as his trot became a rapid jog. Stone mumbled, well aware that he would still have to take a shower before mealtime. The task of beating time loomed ominously before him.

And then he heard a familiar sound that sent him spinning as he ran, turning to face the way he had come. The Jeep pulled up directly beside Stone, and both Jo Corbett and Jeff King nodded their heads in greeting. Stone stared at the smiling face and bleached golden hair of Jo Corbett, and for the first time since arriving on the island he was actually pleased to see the authoritative security

chief.

A minute later John Stone was sitting comfortably in the rear of the Jeep, speeding his way back to the main camp and wondering what he had ever been worried about.

CHAPTER 6

DAY 4

Stone showered, and the warm water helped to wash away some of the deep frustrations and tiredness from his body. Training was proving a tiresome and draining experience, and it was only early days yet. For some, it was proving a particularly harrowing ordeal.

He thought about Linda. She had incurred several more blistering attacks from Penny White's acid tongue, but she had not been alone. Just as Stone had predicted, both Peter and Tony had incurred intense scrutiny with tongue-lashings to match. While these three candidates had endured the worst of Penny's scorn, forced to sit quietly through repeated vitriolic attacks, no one had escaped without tasting the humiliation of the young teacher's relentless and bitter onslaughts.

Not even Stone.

He wondered how such a pleasant looking woman – young, pretty and almost elfin could take on such a cruel, attacking stance so easily and so often. Away from the classroom she smiled and seemed so pleasant, her small frame and fine featured face giving no hint of the ravenous wolf lurking inside. Once in the classroom she was a snarling carnivore – a shark and a monster, intent on tearing at the jugular of her prey.

Once cleaned up and fed, though, Stone felt better, as did the other candidates. Their time was their own again, and by now, rivalry was giving way, at least in part, enough to allow them to spend enjoyable time together. Their examiners had been hard on them, and having a common enemy was beginning to cement the candidates together, encouraging them to make friends and not be so keen to stand alone.

Only Stone's roommate, Nick Tanner, and the dark woman Erin Brown, remained aloof. No one had been able to crack their façades of coldness and self-sufficiency, and the two ate, sat and dined alone. The only reason either candidate had a roommate was because management demanded it, or there was little doubt that they would have slept away from their colleagues too.

Katrina Redding sat by Stone for the evening meal, with Brice and Sandra opposite. They spoke in hushed tones of the trials of the program, but once the burden had been shared, moved on to more pleasant matters, namely their surroundings. No one had failed to be surprised and inspired by the beauty of Valkyrie Island. Another fact that had been uncomfortably obvious to those who spent any time with them, was that Brice and Sandra shared more than a casual friendship. *Much more.* And considering the warnings associated with displaying such a relationship on Valkyrie, both Stone and Katrina felt a pressing need to remind them of the risks.

As Stone watched Brice and Sandra sitting opposite, he could see that they did, in fact, share a blossoming love for each other. So smitten were they that they could barely remain apart. He felt compelled to say something, even though in a very real sense, there was more than one good reason not to.

“Listen you two,” he said quietly, afraid of how his advice might be received by people who barely knew him. “You’ll forgive me for thinking that perhaps you two have something going.” They fell silent, and since they not argue with him, he persisted.

“It seems to me that you are friends – *real* good friends. It’s none of my business, I know, and I shouldn’t be telling my rivals this, but you two need to be careful. Let’s just say that the two of you look pretty chummy, and that *this* is not the best place to show it.” He pursed his lips in an apologetic way, to show that he was sorry for intruding.

Brice turned a quizzical look at Sandra, who then mimicked him. They said nothing at first, but then Brice simply raised his eyebrows and screwed up his lips. Just for a moment he clearly thought he was in trouble.

“What are you saying, John? Are you going to tell someone?” he asked, not even trying to bluff.

“*No*, I’m not going to tell anyone,” whispered Stone, annoyed that Brice could even think it. “But *you are* if you keep hanging off each other like you do. You’ve worked hard to get here – both of you. I just don’t want to see you throw it all away. Just wait out the month, *that’s all*. If they think you two are an item, they’ll kick both of you out – not just one of you.

“No, I wouldn’t put you in. Don’t be *ridiculous*. That’s not me. I think you should be able to do whatever you want. I’m just saying that you gave up a lot to get here – and you *could* think about toning it down a touch while you’re here, that’s all.”

Katrina elbowed Stone’s arm and joined the conversation.

“Look guys,” she whispered. “We don’t want to sound like Linford. ‘*Don’t do this, don’t do*

that... We're *all* adults here. We *know* where you're at. It's just that we want you to be careful." She said the words in a jovial way, but Stone thought he detected something deeper in her tone.

"That's right. We're not trying to be a pair of killjoys," he said. "We just don't want to see you throw it all away. It's only a month, you know. You guys have put a lot into getting here – just like the rest of us." He eyed them both in turn. "You've come a long way and we're just trying to tell you that if *we* can see it, *Linford* can too. But no, *we're* certainly not going to say anything."

The couple nodded, realizing that his intentions were good. They said nothing at first, but then Brice confessed.

"Sometimes it makes no sense us being here at all," he said, twisting one corner of his mouth. He lowered his head, and his voice became a whisper. "The truth is that we are planning to get married. Funny eh? Two of Linford's execs, married! So we're trying out for the job, hoping that at least *one* of us might get it. Once either of us is in, it's that much harder for her to throw us out. So we're just waiting until the month is out, and then we plan to tie the knot – and to hell with the consequences. We've been seeing each other for almost a year, and we just can't wait much longer. It's crazy."

Stone closed his eyes for a time, silently nodding in agreement. It *was* crazy. To think that two adults could still be dictated to defied logic. However, he was a realist, and knew that to survive this test, these two lovebirds would have to follow the rules. He apologized and said nothing more. A moment later he sensed the same hidden agenda in Katrina's voice as she tried to reinforce her support of the two.

"The only thing that's crazy is that we're expected to *never say* how we feel. You can't just pretend that you're *not in love*," she said. She sounded vehement, stirred almost to the core.

Stone breathed a deep breath, thinking hard on her words. He could hardly disagree.

A short while later, Brice and Sandra thanked them for their concern, and then, despite the warning, left together. Katrina continued in a jovial way to chide Stone for pouring cold water on the pair, and then insisted that he take a walk with her to the dock.



Moonlight danced on the ocean as the two strolled casually toward the timber dock. A cloudless sky revealed bright stars and a waxing moon. In another week it would be full, and Katrina wondered how majestic the view would be by then. Waves broke continuously, providing a

crisp, romantic serenade by which to walk. Watery crests rolled and fell, sending small plumes of white froth that rose and tumbled in the night air, and reflected the growing light of the moon.

It was a dreamlike picture and a perfect setting for what Katrina had in mind.

But in stark contrast, and in accordance with Virginia Linford's harsh rules, she did not dare move close to Stone, let alone hold his hand, even though she wanted to.

The dock stretched its dark arm out fifty meters into the golden glow of the tumbling waves and moonlight, and then it was Stone's heart that skipped. Rocking so gently that the movement was barely perceptible, tied at the end of the dock and bathed in a pale glow was the *Mermaid*. A single circle of yellow light adorned the side of the sleek vessel where an internal light burned, and Stone knew that behind that small round window would be Captain Mary Stewart.

Their shoes made soft padding sounds as they began to tread the timber decking of the dock, and each slow pace brought them ever closer to the sleek *Mermaid*, and the ache he felt. The setting was immaculate, as was his pain.

Katrina eventually placed a hand under Stone's arm to halt his advance. They were directly beneath the last electric light along the dock, and almost half way along. The end light near the *Mermaid* was no longer working, and apart from another single light that marked the starting point of the timber decking, this was the only other. The small, dull bulb burned above their heads, and Katrina suddenly found herself making small talk.

"Where do you think they get their power from, John?" she asked. The sound of her voice brought him from his mental wanderings, and he answered her factually.

"Solar panels, Katie. Same as a sailing boat. That's where all the power comes from on the island. Jo Corbett told me."

"They work well considering it's night-time," she quipped, and he smiled slightly at her small joke. Katrina's remark served only to break the tension briefly for her, and then a deep nervousness settled over her again. She realized how little she cared about the workings of the island, and how silly she felt. The business side of her nature quickly rose to the surface, forcing her to speak her mind.

"Would you sit with me, John? I have to speak with you." Katrina knew what she must do, and she allowed the courage of her convictions to overrule her fears. The two did their best to get comfortable on the hard timber decking, their feet hanging over the edge and dangling some distance above the shimmering, choppy water.

"We're safe here," she said. "*Everyone* can see us, and they can see that we are *not*, well you

know, being *overly* friendly.” Her comment showed more than a trace of annoyance, but also helped to disguise the fact that she was rather nervous. It was only as she began to speak that Stone realized how much she was struggling. Mistaking her problem, he cut her off prematurely.

“How have you been since your sister?”

She turned to look at him, and he was surprised at the controlled face she displayed. The initial anger and pain of the tragedy was gone, and she seemed more at ease than he expected. His sharp business mind missed her emotional dilemma completely.

“I miss Simone every day,” she answered quietly. “I loved my little sister like no other, John. I was so angry that I thought I’d die at first, but in time I came to realize that I refused to let that animal kill *both of us*. I hope they catch him some day, but until then, I intend to live life as best I can – and that includes *not* letting hatred of her killer eat me away.”

“Well done,” he said softly. “I’m impressed. I’m always proud of you, Katie, but that’s even more impressive than usual.” He paused, sharing her loss. He had known Simone in their youth, and in a very real way Katrina’s pain was his pain too.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I suppose I can always *try* to see a positive side to all that happened. I mean, I’d never have wished a moment’s harm on Simmy, but I guess wouldn’t even be here – *with you* – if she hadn’t... died. At least I can be here with you now.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” he agreed cautiously. He knew she was still grieving, and to agree too strongly might be a mistake. Simone had been very precious to Katrina. “Still, I *am* sorry. It seems like the only time we ever meet up is at funerals. We’ve gotta stop meeting like that.”

She gave him a small smile, well aware of how much pain they had both endured in past years, and of how they had helped each other through those awful times of deep loss. They had been there for each other in their turn, when each of them had searched without success to understand what had happened in their lives.

“Yeah,” she agreed, “but that’s not what I wanted to talk about.” Her sudden seriousness caught him by surprise.

“This is *crazy*,” she began. “I’m almost thirty years old, I’m a company exec, and I feel like a *teenage girl*. I’ve done deals worth millions and yet I can’t just say what I want to.” She baulked, and Stone stared at her, waiting. For the first time he realized where the conversation might go, and he felt a sudden, new discomfort of his own. If his guess was correct, then he thought Katrina’s timing might have left something to be desired. Yet, she had stood by him through so many difficult times in past years, and more than that, he cared deeply for her. He *always had*. So now he owed it

to her to listen with love and respect. He encouraged her with a simple whisper.

“Say it, Katie.”

Her answer came without delay, soft and factual.

“I think the *world of you*, John,” she said honestly, her dark eyes staring at the moonlight as it danced on the white caps. “We spent our youth together, and you were always good to me. You’re a great guy. A *really nice man*. In my line of work I seem to meet all the jerks, and to spend time with *you* is just *so much better*. You’re my best friend, you know? When my sister was, well, you know... you were there for me. You crossed the country just to be near me. We’ve worked on opposite sides of the country most of our working lives, John, but when I think about it, you’ve always been there when I needed you. We were friends when we were kids, and we still are.”

Katrina stopped, afraid that she was mixing everything up. But perhaps it did not matter. He had heard her, and was no longer under any illusions about what she meant. She tried to justify herself.

“We’ve been the best of friends for *so long*, John. I’ve never tried to take it any further than that, you know. What we have is rare and precious, and I’ve never wanted to lose it. It’s just that lately I realized that so many men *hit on me*, but none of them *care at all* about me. It’s like I’m a trophy or a prize or something. You know – hey, there’s the fashion industry exec – *go for it!*” She gazed at him in the moonlight, her eyes wet with tears, then returned to staring at the picturesque white caps.

“But *not you*, John. You’re my best friend and my confidant, and you *never once* tried to make a move on me. *Never once* did you say *anything* out of place to me. That’s so rare, John.” Afraid, and wanting to let herself off the hook a little, she joked about something from their past. “Oh well, there *was* that one time when you offered to tell my girlfriend we were lovers...”

He held up a restraining hand, knowing full well what she would remind him of, and then he nodded in silence. She was right. Attractive as she had always been, their friendship had meant too much to risk making unnecessary sexual moves. Katrina followed on with her thoughts, unwilling to leave without saying what she had come for.

“And just lately I’ve been asking myself what am I *really* looking for in this world, and you know what? It’s a *friend*. I’ve always loved you John. You’re my *friend*. But we’ve been friends for so long that I never realized *how much* I loved you.” She paused, then summed up her feelings in the simplest and most powerful way she could.

“We’re not getting any younger, John, and for the *first* time in my life I *know* what I want –

and I want to be *more* than just your friend. *I love you, John.*” Again she faltered, shaking her head and making small talk.

“Wow, now I know how Brice and Sandra feel.”

Stone said nothing at first, but stared sideways at her, suddenly aware that he had been completely blind. A lightning bolt of realization blazed through the crystal sky to shock his dull mind into comprehension, but alas, too late by far. Suddenly he realized why his dearest friend had been *so* happy these past days – *so unusually effervescent*. It had not been her inclusion in Virginia Linford’s test that had elated Katrina – it had been *seeing him!*

Katrina was bathed in pale light, the gentle onshore wind flicking her short, dark hair, but never disheveling it. She was mature and she was perfect. *So perfect!* Her brown eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and she was startling to behold. Stone swallowed, realizing just how much she meant to him too. His love for her was not a new concept to him. He had *always* loved his friend too, from their youth – but he had never dared to think of her as more than his *best friend*. He treasured her, loved, adored and respected her, but *this* caught him completely by surprise.

“*I’m in love with you, John.*”

Her words cut deep into him as she repeated them, and stirred up a fiery cocktail of confusion. He loved her in return, and she knew it. But he was not ready for this. In truth, he thought his affections now belonged to Mary, a woman he barely knew, a woman not thirty meters from where they now sat. Mary had excited him so much that he had not even noticed Katrina’s feelings these past days.

In the absence of an immediate reply, Katrina felt foolish, and quickly resorted to small talk again.

“I realize that this doesn’t fit in with the business plan,” she joked, sniffing. “Wow, what Virginia Linford would say if she could hear me right now.”

“Shh.” He cut her off with a soft, sensitive hush. He struggled for the right words, wanting not to hurt her, and yet desperate to answer honestly. “I feel it too, Katie,” he stumbled, “You know that. But you, but your...”

He raised his eyes to the sparkling, starry sky, fumbling, desperately trying to know his own heart, despising the thought that he might cause her pain. “But your timing really *sucks*. *Oh, Katie!* I thought you were like my *sister!* You’re not supposed to go confusing things like this!” He said it with humor and she smiled at his way of dealing with it. “You’re my friend and *I love you too, but...*”

He could see no other way, so he blurted it out.

“Look Katie, this is not a *business deal*. And I can’t tell you what *I’m not sure of*. I always cared for you – you know that. I’d *die* for you! But the truth is that I didn’t realize how much I cared for you until *right now*. I mean, of course I did, but – I can’t lie to you. I’ve, I’ve – There *is someone else*.” He waited in fear, dreading her reaction.

Katrina gasped as though she had been struck. She felt deep sorrow stabbing into her, and regretted painfully that she had not told him sooner of her love. Then she felt foolish and ashamed. She lowered her head and stared silently into the waves below their feet. She too fumbled for words, having several attempts at replying before composing a full sentence.

“Well, I guess... that... I...” She smiled and looked him in the eyes. Her face glowed with beauty, and with a deep and loving maturity.

“Serves me right,” she said, “I waited too long to tell you, and of *course* you found someone else.” She wiped away tears from her pretty, glistening eyes, but maintained a brave smile, never looking away from Stone’s face.

“You’re a good man, John. *The best*. Whoever she is, I wish you both the very best.” She caressed his face with her slender fingers, and Stone felt the moistness of her tears. He felt absolutely *sick*. No business planning could have prepared him for this runaway juggernaut of emotions. They had never fought, and this was as close as they had ever come to hurting one another. Until now he had never had reason to question his love for his friend, and the realization of just *how much* she meant to him was powerful and disarming.

“I’m *sorry*, Katie,” he urged. “I truly am. I *do* love you. It’s just – you’ve caught me by surprise, and I don’t know what to say. And then you go and tell me when...” He wrestled, acutely aware of how much she meant to him. “You’re my best friend in the whole world – how long have you felt this way?”

“Ages,” she whispered. “But hey, we’re in business, and somehow I just never got around to telling you. Pretty stupid, huh? When my sister died you were there in a flash, ready to be my knight in shining armor, ready to rescue me and see me through. And you’ve *always* done that for me. It really struck me after Simone’s funeral. You were *there for me*. You *always were*. And I just thought I could wait until I saw you *here* to tell you how I felt – but now it’s too late. Like I said, pretty stupid, eh?”

He raised his eyebrows and sighed. He no longer knew.



As Stone accompanied Katrina along the timber dock toward the main camp, their hearts heavy with emotion, he knew he could not go back to the *Mermaid*. An hour ago he might have risked approaching it in the hope that Mary might see him, but not now. Now he was churning with emotion and confusion. His best friend at his side was deeply wounded, and *he* was to blame. Going back along the dock was not an option, not even in the hope of a glimpse of Mary Stewart.

His tormented mind came snapping back to harsh reality, though, as he saw a small flash of movement just thirty meters ahead and slightly to his left, where the palm trees and grass met the sand.

In the dim light he could make out very little, but he knew without doubt that someone had been watching them, hiding there in the shadows, and now they were scurrying away for fear of being seen. He ran forward a few paces, angered at the clandestine behavior of the spy, but quickly gave the chase away when he heard the sound of Katrina's voice calling behind him.

"*John! John! Leave it,*" she urged. "We haven't *done* anything. No one can say anything about us. Just leave it. *Please!*" And then she said soft words that swayed him more than any argument of logic could. "Don't leave me *alone* out here, *please.*"

So he gave away the idea of chasing the spy, and returned to Katrina, escorting her safely to the camp.



DAY 5

The morning session left the candidates more drained than ever.

Penny White was on the warpath, slicing and dicing both individuals and their opinions. Any incorrect answer brought a vitriolic cascade spewing forth from her, cutting recipients to shreds without compassion before their fellow aspirants. And not only that, she seemed to have intensified her attacks on certain individuals.

Now not only had Linda, Peter and Tony come in for extra doses of bile, but Katrina's friend Michelle and her friend Michael had both shared in the morning's abuses. Even the loners, Nick and Erin had been savagely dosed with venom. The only ones who had escaped relatively unscathed

were John Stone, Katrina Redding, and Jenny Walsh.

It had taken all their business skills to dodge the flaming arrows of their tutor, and had left all tired and drained. Some began to wonder if their tenure on the island might be in doubt as a result of Penny's unrelenting and bitter attacks, yet neither Virginia Linford nor Debra Birch gave a hint that any candidate was in danger of being sent home. The group began to wonder if perhaps part of Linford's test was simply to see how they would react under attack, both of themselves and of their friends. This theory buoyed them, giving those with flagging spirits the strength to endure.

The real consolation came when Virginia Linford again announced that the afternoon was free, and the candidates could again go where they pleased.



Stone wasted no time, striding purposefully to where he hoped Mary Stewart would be. If she had been there once, he hoped, perhaps she would be there again.

He felt guilty now, torn between the prospect of a woman he felt great admiration for, and who shared his love of the sea, and his love for an *old friend* – a friend who just last night had exposed her deepest feelings to him. He felt greatly for both of them – but for reasons that were worlds apart, and now a mix of emotions assaulted and burned within him. He determined in his mind to take care and think his way carefully through it, but his heart was not listening, and drove him on to find Mary. Perhaps time spent with her might help him to know better.

Surely that would tell him... He pushed down feelings of guilt by applying convenient logic.

Katrina had made a confession of love, and this had forced Stone to face the fact that he had *always* loved her as a friend, and to be sure, his feelings for her were very deep. He cared enormously for her. But somehow, they had always remained just that – *friends*. To advance further had never seemed an option. He had never dared! It seemed so ludicrous now.

Mary, on the other hand, had won his adoration in an instant and without a word. Standing up there on the upper deck, hands firmly on the helm with the spray in her hair – she was *wonderful*. Mary had displayed the very asset that he had given up hope of ever finding in a woman. She loved the sea.

He justified ignoring the nagging feeling of betrayal he felt toward Katrina by deciding that the only logical course of action was to find out for sure how he felt. And there was only one way to do that. *He had to speak with Mary.*

His desire to see her burned within him, and it drove him on with a rapid stride. Still, he found himself peering about suspiciously, continually searching for last night's spy. It seemed logical that it was one of Linford's underlings, trying to catch the candidates out. He wondered what he would say or do should he actually catch the offender. Arguing with management was something he very much hoped to avoid at present, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sit by and do nothing. The rules were fast becoming more and more frustrating.

His heart skipped, pounding in his chest even before he reached the hidden cove.

Whispers of glimmering white broke through the dense trees and vegetation, revealing something on the water within the picturesque inlet, and he knew instinctively that it was the white sheen of the *Mermaid*.



Mary Stewart rolled on the beach towel to expose a different part of her tanned skin to the sun, and moreover, so that she could face John Stone. He admired her beauty, unable to ignore her wonderful shape, accentuated as it was by her swimsuit. She was as lovely as the idyllic surroundings in which they rested. Her long blonde hair hung about her face, a crown of fair beauty, and Stone was dazzled by her.

"You're a rare find, John," she said, mimicking his thoughts about her.

Without another word she surprised him, leaning closer to kiss him. As much as both she and the setting were so perfect, it further surprised Stone to feel a deep apprehension wash over him. *Was it his past?* he wondered, still deeply affected by all that had transpired leading up to Kim's death.

Or was it his dearest friend's confession of love?

It was both, he realized, and Mary could see his hesitation in a moment. She hesitated too, then withdrew a little, sensitive to his caution. But a few long seconds later, and in the absence of any further withdrawal from him, she persisted. First it was a peck, and then a longer, more meaningful kiss. She took it slowly, not wanting to rush the moment. When they withdrew, neither said anything. They stared at the gentle waves that caressed the sandy beach of the cove. It was a truly sensitive moment that left them both exhilarated and wondering. But his small hesitation caused her to tread carefully and honestly.

"You're not ready," she said finally. He stared into her striking blue eyes, waiting. She was

right, and to proceed seemed starkly wrong. He waited, guessing that she had more to say. “There’s something you should know, John. I’ve got to leave here tomorrow morning.”

The news sent a cold shiver through him, cutting deep, but he revived with her explanation.

“I’ve got to go to the mainland again. Virginia wants me to take most of the staff back, and to pick up some supplies. She said I won’t be returning straight away – she’s got *some job* for me to do. Anyway, the point is that I *will* be returning, but I don’t know when.”

Stone continued to stare, his lips pursed in disappointment.

“Oh well,” he finally admitted, “there’s not much we can do about that. Whatever happens, we can talk again once all this is over.”

The smile ran away from her face, but she refused to be so easily defeated. Hope burned within her, and she struggled to read his true feelings.

“That sounds ominous,” she noted.

“I’m... I’m just a bit unsure right now,” he admitted. “Just need time to think. The last thing I want is for anyone to get hurt. There’s been enough of that in my life already. You’re... *amazing*, but I just can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

It sounded final, and yet Mary would not be dissuaded. *He was interested* – that much she knew for certain. But she could tell that something had happened since their first meeting. Where he had been so certain, he was clearly no longer sure. Or was it more?

She could not tell.

CHAPTER 7

DAY 6

Stone stood deathly still, scarcely daring to breathe.

The short-haired woman passed just two meters from him, her back to him as she crept silently along, but not silently enough. She paused, listening intently for any sound, but she could hear nothing over the chirping of birds and the rustle of leaves and grass.

Stone itched from the twigs he had stuffed into his cap, and he longed to wash off the mud he had caked over his face. It all made lying still in the bushes and grass so much more difficult, and he wanted desperately to scratch, but this was not the time.

He stared at her shape and his heart raced as he studied her. She was tall and slim and her

feminine figure still showed as she bent, even in her loose fitting, drab green clothes. She crouched, her shapely behind just in front of him, and she had no idea of his presence, hidden in thick bushes as he was. He watched her, transfixed by her as she thought out where to go next.

She looked from side to side, searching for others, and the action was immediately mimicked by Stone. It would not do to be caught. *Especially not now.* Stone stared longingly at her. He could see her plastic glasses when she turned. He imagined that he could smell her perfume. And he could hear her breathe. She made him ache with anticipation. Even in padded khaki, Katrina looked fantastic.

Katrina looked to both sides again, and then at the ground before her. There were tracks where the long grass had been flattened, and she suddenly wondered whether coming down this path had been wise. She moved forward just a meter, still crouching in the long grass. Stone watched her, remembering their discussion on the dock, and he longed for her. She excited him, and he ached to spend time with her. His mind went back to Mary and the cove, and his stomach suddenly churned with anguish. Things had become so complicated.

Mary excited him too, but the difference was that Mary shared his primary love, the ocean. Katrina, on the other hand, had been his faithful friend for many years, and Stone had never realized the depth of his love for her until she had confessed her own. The hours since their walk on the dock had not passed easily.

He forced the feelings down, very much aware of the need to remain focused. But a new, though related anguish rose up in his belly as he drew his weapon to the ready. Moving slowly so as not to alert Katrina to his presence, Stone silently brought the short rifle forward, then level. Then he sighted her in.

With a finger resting on the trigger, Stone placed the back of Katrina's head in the circular eyepiece, the top of the small metal needle right on center. The brim of her drab green helmet filled his view. His breathing grew more rapid as he considered his options. There was enormous anguish, and yet there was an undeniable thrill. Something in him told him to shoot her.

Do it, he thought. He swallowed. *She'll never see it coming. Do it now!* Put her out of her misery.

But he could not. Not in the head, anyway. He lowered the gun sight and prepared to shoot her in the back. Two quick shots; that would do it. All over. She'd be dead and he'd have done what he had to. It had to end, and this was the only way. He had no choice. He *had* to shoot her.

She had been suffering, that much he knew for certain. She had shared her fears with him

about this day. He knew she was terrified. Even now she was like a gentle fawn, and though armed, she may as well not have been. She was uncomfortable with the weapon she toted, and would likely never use it even if given the chance. It seemed almost merciful to shoot her. He had to end it now. He *had* to kill her.

Staring along the barrel and into Katrina's back, Stone suddenly realized just how much he really *did* love her. With her life hanging in his hands, it made sense to him. Not only was she beautiful and charming, but she had always been his best friend. *And she loved him!* He blinked, and then blinked again. Then he realized it was tears he was clearing from his eyes.

How could he kill her?

He steadied himself, still intent on pulling the trigger. Katrina looked to one side again, and for a frightening moment Stone wondered if she might see him. He knew he would never be able to kill her once she saw him. He knew he couldn't do it once she looked into his eyes. He loved her too much. It would simply be too hard.

He closed his eyes slowly and lowered his head, the depth of the truth striking deep into his heart. He *could not* kill Katrina. *He loved her.* He would *never* be able to do it. In that moment he realized that he would rather die himself than kill her.

He opened his eyes again and softly whistled to her, so gently that only she would hear. She heard, but at first was unsure of the direction from which the sound had come. Her head dropped automatically as she wondered whether the sound had come from friend or foe. She knew full well that any foe who whistled to her would doubtlessly be about to take her life, playing with her, encouraging her to turn so that her killer would have a clearer shot.

Katrina pivoted on the balls of her feet and turned her head sharply as she sought the source of the sound. Stone's camouflage was so effective that it took some seconds before her pretty face began to blossom into a smile. She had seen him.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Three sharp sounds popped somewhere to Stone's right, alerting him of the intruder's presence, but it was too late. Simultaneous to the sounds came three bright scarlet blotches on Katrina's back. The red stains were large and round, and a red mist hung in the air for some seconds after she was hit. She grunted with shock and pain as each projectile found its mark, her killer unable to miss such an easy, open target. Her lovely smile changed to anguish and disappointment in a second, and Stone watched with heartache and dismay as the woman he loved dropped to the ground without a fight.

And then he was angry.

The hidden figure came out from the safety of cover, and Stone could hear footsteps approaching. Katrina lay almost motionless, her body twisted and her face turned so that she could see the man she loved. Stone knew that she was watching him, and hoped that her eyes would not give his position away. They did not. Instead, Katrina's brown eyes purposely turned away from him so as not to alert the intruder. It was an act of love, and done very much to give Stone the advantage.

Gloating over his kill, Nick strode confidently up as if he was going to kick Katrina's fallen body. Instead, he bent over her and leered down.

"Got you!" he stated glibly, and nudged one of her feet. Stone was annoyed. Not only had Katrina been shot in the back, but she'd been shot by a man who would now gloat about the fact. He raised his own weapon and fired three times.

Nick was caught off guard and stumbled back as each projectile struck him. A blue stain exploded on his side, and then two more appeared on his chest as he turned. A second mist hung in the air as Nick fell, this time a bright shade of sky-blue. There came a satisfying thud as Nick stumbled and crashed heavily to the grassy earth, knocked off balance by the shots. Then came an indistinguishable, disgruntled cursing sound.

Stone emerged, no longer afraid. Rather than bothering with self-preservation, he stood and extended his left hand to Katrina, who reached up and took it gladly. As she rose, so did Nick, complaining as he did so.

"And I got you," pointed out Stone.

The comment brought another curse from the sullen loner, and Nick raised his weapon as if to shoot the man who had shot him. Stone spun Katrina so that she was out of the firing line, and countered by automatically leveling his weapon at Nick once more. He quickly snapped out a warning.

"Shoot me after you're already shot and you'll be on the next boat home, Nick! You know the rules."

Even as Stone spoke, Katrina was also reacting, not with her paint gun, but with her body. Having been cast aside by Stone in a bid to spare her more painful stings and bruises, she then threw herself between the two men, ready to absorb any shots from Nick's gun, knowing that Stone would be out of the contest once shot, regardless of who cheated.

Nick hesitated, then lowered his weapon again, a look of anger etched deeply into his face.

Stone was unsure whether Nick would have pulled the trigger had Katrina not intervened, and now he would never know. The tension passed, and some seconds later, with the opportunity missed and reason returning, Nick came off the boil. Still angry, he mumbled and wandered off toward the second camp to rendezvous with his other fallen comrades.

Stone thanked Katrina for her act of selflessness, then hugged her. It was an awkward moment for both, though also very pleasant.

“You could have shot me, but you didn’t,” Katrina noted gladly.

“And you tried to take a hit to save me,” he noted.

The gunplay and realizations of what had just transpired was not lost on either. Both felt a need to talk. Katrina knew he had weakened his own chances of success when he had refused to shoot her, and that he had endangered himself further by allowing her the chance to shoot him. Her heart skipped at the thoughts. But she would not allow him to lose his chance at victory by delaying.

“Don’t talk now,” she whispered. “You’ve still got a battle to fight. Now get out there and *win!*”



Erin Brown crouched low when she saw Linda sneaking through the undergrowth.

Linda’s back was exposed, and Erin’s first, natural impulse was to plaster the woman with paint. Instinct, however, prevented her. Erin took some degree of pride in her ancestry, and whether the image in her own case was deserved or not, she considered herself worthy of warrior status. She had proven time and again her battle prowess in the boardroom and business world, so why not in the wild? Something within told her that she could win the war-games if she simply used her killer instincts, and experience had proven that she certainly was not lacking those.

She paused, her dark skin and drab khaki padded suit giving her an excellent ability to hide. She had spent some time creeping about in the undergrowth, battling the beads of sweat that ran uncomfortably down her back. She had battled the stickiness of the heavy, padded clothes she was forced to wear. And then there had been the mosquitoes.

Not many of those, admittedly, but she prided herself on her ability to resist the urge to swat the moment she saw one, rather moving slowly to ensure its demise than to risk any sudden movement that might have alerted others to her presence. Just that composure alone had cost her several stinging bites. *She deserved the pleasure of a kill for enduring that!* Suited or not to the

war-games and the wild, she was determined to succeed at any cost. She eyed Linda's left side and back as the Italian woman crept along.

Then Erin lowered her weapon. Linda's movements had suddenly become decisively different in the last few paces. Erin had been gaining on the brunette, purposely closing the gap between them to a mere six or seven meters, a difficult task to achieve amid the large boulders and heavy undergrowth. Cover was plentiful, but so was the blanket of leaves and small twigs that would alert her prey to her presence with just a single poorly placed step.

She deserved Linda. She had stalked the Italian, and her heart raced at the thought of claiming her first scalp. She *would not* be denied. She would kill this lumbering city slicker, who was better suited to the boardroom than any real or practical situation – even a *game*. She would send her packing, back to the presence of the other war-games victims – where she belonged. And it would be *so simple*.

But clearly Linda had seen something too.

Erin was forced to wait. She felt a bead of warm sweat trickle down the length of her nose, but made no movement to force the annoying drop to fall. Her dark eyes scoured the craggy landscape, searching every crevice and bush for a third intruder. She wanted desperately to shoot Linda, but forced herself to wait. Patience always paid off, she thought. Just wait. A little more...

The small sound of a snapping twig gave her the first sign that she had been correct in her decision to wait. Linda's body ducked silently down. She had heard the sound too. So, Erin thought, Linda the city slicker *was also* stalking someone. Erin shook with tension and a deep excitement at the prospect of bagging *two victims*.

Even better, she thought. With intense control she managed to crawl silently another two meters without Linda being aware of her presence. If all went well now, Erin knew, she might be able to claim both scalps.

She waited.



Peter trudged quickly across the flat grassy expanse, knowing that the short range of the paint guns would mean that even if seen, he could likely outrun his enemies before they could get in range of him.

He reached the sandy dune without incident, then rested by a particularly large tree stump

while he caught his breath. He looked about. Then, in the absence of enemies, he decided to make another dash for the crest of the next dune, where cover was more plentiful. Peter knew that one of his greatest assets was his ability to run, and provided he could avoid a close encounter, he figured he could outrun any competitor before they could get within range. Besides, he was sure he had seen a movement of khaki a short time earlier. If he was correct, perhaps he could intercept his enemy and set himself to wait in ambush before the person passed by.

Once at the crest of the dune he found himself amid a plot of casuarinas, padding along on a blanket of tiny fronds. This afforded him somewhat less than the perfect cover of other places he had been that afternoon, but did allow him to move in relative silence. He moved quickly beneath the shady trees, enjoying the soft breeze that helped to ease the discomfort of the sweat that now stuck his padded khaki shirt to his upper body.

He circled toward where he guessed the intruder might appear, moving to a new terrain, away from the shady casuarinas to rougher ground, and shorter, thicker bushes. True to his hunch, as he took an offensive position between some large sandstone boulders, he could see the faint, but certain movement of a dirty, green battle-suit just twenty meters ahead of him. He lowered, his breathing still hard from the exertion of running, and now from the excitement of a potential kill.

The figure moved slowly but surely toward him, creeping cautiously. Peter raised his paint gun in silence, his breaths the only sound he made.

"Got you," he whispered.

Then he waited for the individual to crawl from hiding so that he could take his shot. But to Peter's astonishment, there crept not just one khaki figure from the brush, but two.



Linda crouched and silently cursed the sweat that rolled down into her eyes.

She hated the war-games, and had done little to hide her distaste at the idea of stalking candidates in what she called "the jungle", trying to shoot them. *'Barbaric'* was the word she had used. A genuine fear of bruising remained ever-present in her mind, despite the thick padding within the drab overall she wore. As she cursed the sweat that streamed from her body, she thought how much she despised the loose fitting suit, its padding causing constant warmth and discomfort. Still, she decided, if she was shot, the more padding she could tote, the better.

A fully-fledged hatred of the whole affair had consumed her from the outset. She had cursed

silently all afternoon, despising the concept of having to crawl through the *'jungle'* just to prove she could shoot some other poor unfortunate. It was ludicrous to her.

"I didn't train for this," she mumbled angrily. "If I wanted this rubbish, I'd have joined the army!" Her grumbling fell silent a short time later when she heard a small sound.

As she crouched and began stalking her unseen prey, Linda's whole being suddenly came alive. She had despised the concept of being shot, risking bruises and *who knew* what other injuries. But in the instant that she realized she might have an advantage – a chance to shoot another candidate, Linda suddenly began to hunt. All sense of mercy left her. In that moment she became willing to kill at any cost.

She lowered and crept forward, her movements slowing to a mere crawl. The thought of killing suddenly invigorated her.

"Come to Mama," she whispered, her body trembling. "Come on. Come to Mama, Baby."



Michael looked up with no more than a split second to react, and somehow managed to duck Linda's first shot.

He heard it zip over his head as he dropped instinctively for cover. His heart pounded, adrenalin giving him the necessary surge of speed it required to remain in the game. Somewhere just behind him he heard the first paint ball explode with a sharp slapping sound. He fired blindly back to where he had seen Linda suddenly rise from the cover of a boulder, his arm held aloft in the tall grass as he sought the safety of a nearby log.

Erin Brown could not resist the urge any longer. Positioned to Linda's left and just behind her, she had a close and clear view of the Italian woman's entire back, made even more available as Linda rose to shoot at Michael. Michael's blind shot from the safety of the grass splattered on a boulder just to Linda's right, distracting her as she sought not to be plastered with the purple dye. It gave Erin the perfect opportunity. The dark woman grinned wildly as she too rose from cover, sighted in Linda's back, and squeezed the trigger.

To Erin's enormous surprise she saw first a yellow blotch appear on Linda's back, followed within the same second by her own green smacking ball of paint. Linda groaned loudly and buckled forward as she received two hard smacks almost simultaneously. The two paint balls brought a grunt of pain from the Italian, who spun instinctively to see where the attack had come from. A third

purple ball then exploded over her central chest as Michael took his second, more carefully placed shot. Linda toppled, seeking as much to avoid any more painful hits as to show her surrender.

Before Erin's widening eyes could even sight in the hidden player who had simultaneously shot Linda, she knew she was finished. Jenny Walsh's aim was true, having had plenty of time to plan her attack upon her two unsuspecting rivals. Erin's chest exploded in a mist of yellow dye. The dark woman withstood the attack, despite the fact that she felt as though she had been punched, and like the others, she was glad for the padding beneath the khaki. In another moment though, she allowed her weapon to hang loosely from her right hand, and her face showed a bitter mix of disgust and surrender.

"Damn it!" she cursed aloud.

She would have said more, but found herself suddenly forced to drop down as the battle continued to rage. A purple projectile whizzed by her head as Michael, now realizing that Erin was removed from the game, took a wild shot at Jenny before ducking again for cover.

Jenny also went down as the purple ball exploded behind her.

Too close, she thought. Glasses or not, that would have hurt if it had struck her in the head. She wondered at Virginia Linford's willingness to place her prized candidates in such potential danger. Still, she reasoned, this was not the time to question trivialities. She rose and dashed forward, then threw herself down close behind the fallen Linda. As she rose again to search for a shot at Michael, Linda suddenly obscured her view, and Jenny sent a futile shot whizzing off high over the young man's position.

"Get down!" Jenny screamed at the cussing Italian.

Linda, still smarting from the three hits she had received, dropped again, shocked by the screaming demand of her fellow candidate. Her face reacted with shock at the ferocity of Jenny's command, and then with anguish as she realized that she had probably thwarted Jenny's shot at Michael. Another purple explosion near her head caused her to drop down to safety again as Michael sought vengeance upon Jenny.

Linda allowed her weapon to drop, showing all that she was out of the game, and then, with her back hard against the boulder that had hidden her a short time earlier, she shielded the sides of her face with her hands. Close by, Jenny Walsh ignored her as she fired another yellow missile into the region where she knew Michael to be. Not far away Linda could still hear Erin Brown cursing, and a sideways glance at Erin's body language told the Italian woman that the dark woman's anger was not at any pain she may be feeling. Erin was seething because she was out of the game.

Jenny and Michael continued to fire randomly at one another, each of them striving to move about so as to deceive the other as to their position. Jenny happened to glance back to the fallen Linda just in time to see the smarting Italian's eyes widen. Jenny dropped in a flash, knowing full well that Linda had seen something else – something not already part of this war.

She scurried for cover as a new-colored paint ball exploded where her body had been just a second earlier. As Peter's orange projectile splattered harmlessly beside her against a large rock, Jenny gave silent thanks to Linda. *Dead* or not, Linda's inadvertent reaction to Peter's presence behind them had undoubtedly saved her life.

Now Jenny had a new problem. She was positioned almost centrally between her two male rivals, and while the men's weapons lacked the range to shoot accurately at each other, they were well able to strike at Jenny. She was pinned down. Two more puffing explosions erupted at the crest of the boulder behind which she huddled as if to punctuate the fact. To add to her dilemma, she then heard Peter rustling about as he changed position. *No doubt getting a better position for firing*, she thought.

Jenny panted heavily, adrenalin surging through her veins. She *couldn't* let them get her now. Sadly though, it did not take a great deal of battle experience to realize that she was essentially surrounded, caught between two rivals. While her cover was adequate for now, it would only be a matter of time before one or both men would move into a position where he could snipe at her. There was nowhere else to run. Eventually, she realized, *she would die*.

She gritted her teeth as she thought about what to do, and all the while she could hear leaves and twigs and grass rustling in testimony to the two men who were preparing to remove her from the game. Jenny took a long, deep breath, her face now dripping with sweat, her neat, short hair clinging to her forehead beneath her safety-glasses, which had also become cloudy with sweat.

"I didn't come here to let you jerks pick me off like a turkey shoot!" she screamed. "*Come and get me! Come on! Come and get me!*"

She bellowed the words with such ferocity that even the angered Erin Brown was somewhat humbled by it. Both Erin and Linda stared open-mouthed as Jenny broke from cover, running like a maniac toward where she had seen Michael's last position. She dropped and rolled, successfully evading the expected series of orange blossoms that filled the air as Peter sought to bring her down. Then she was up again, still screaming as she ran.

Jenny's piercing scream was shrill, like that of an insane person, wild and murderous with adrenalin. Michael, shocked and surprised by his female colleague's open flirt with danger, was

shocked into a slow and poorly aimed reaction, and managed to fire off only one shot at the tall, screaming lunatic who ran at him, seeking to destroy him. Then his chest made a series of thudding sounds as it blossomed into a bright yellow flower, and the young man was sent skidding backwards through the grass.

Jenny's left arm bucked against her, though not painfully so, and even as she dived for cover she saw the purple mark where she had been clipped. *Not deadly*, she thought. Even Virginia Linford could not disqualify her for that.

Without hesitation, still high on adrenalin and running like a mad woman, she rolled, stood, and then threw herself forward in the direction she had just come. Peter, unwilling to allow his fearsome prey to slip away, and wanting desperately to gain an advantage on the sole survivor of the battle ahead of him, had risen and was running at full speed too.

Linda backed away from her position near the center of all the action, joining Erin. Then both women took several more cautionary steps away from the wild volleys of splattering projectiles that ensued. Having both almost lost control of themselves, Peter and Jenny continued to close the gap between them, running and weaving wildly in an insane effort to avoid the attrition that had to follow.

A series of harmless orange and yellow mists appeared in the air as the two maniacal candidates ran at each other, firing all the while, their projectiles striking and exploding against boulders and trees.

Jenny took the first hit, like a thudding fist it struck her centrally in the stomach, a blow that might normally have caused her to buckle. Driven on by such an intense desire to win though, she was unaware of the cause of the pain, and continued to fire at Peter. The distance between the two enemies now shortened, the pair then made repeated hits on each other, stinging each other with blows to their stomachs, chests and shoulders. Only when a final paintball struck Jenny square in the forehead did the young woman finally fall to her knees.

A new cry emanated from Jenny's lips, this time one of pain, not of valiant attack. Her weapon fell to the sandy ground as both her hands rose to comfort the stinging wound. The shock of the impact wrenched all the candidates from the thrill of attack, and most notably, Peter, who slid to his knees beside her, casting away his weapon as he did so.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" he muttered frantically, suddenly aware of the ferocity of his own attack upon her. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Jenny! Are you okay?"

He forced the young woman's fingers away from the stark orange stain that now plastered

much of her face and her short, blonde hair. Then he flicked her orange-spattered glasses away to investigate for injury. Upon deciding that it appeared he had only stung her, Jenny was surprised that he then hugged her, truly sorry for what he had done in the heat of the moment.

“I’m *so* sorry, Jenny,” he repeated. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I just got carried away, that’s all.” She forced a smile to show that she would survive.

Then for the first time he noticed that she had shot him twice in the chest, the telltale blotches of yellow sprayed in stark contrast to jungle-green. As they calmed, and it became evident that she was not badly hurt, he tried to make light of their wild behavior with humor.

“I guess we’re even,” he said, tugging at his stained khaki to display her handiwork. Jenny forced a smirk.

“It’s okay,” Jenny assured him, then she too felt a little guilty. “I guess *we all* got a little carried away.” She thought about it for a moment. “I got greedy,” she said, still panting from the excitement of the experience. “Call it *competitive tunnel vision*, Peter. But I’ll get you next time.”

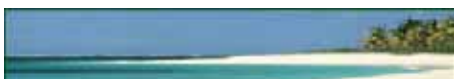
She said the words with a slight grin, but he knew she was *quite* serious.



As the number of painted soldiers grew at the camp at the south-eastern tip of Valkyrie, a basic trend emerged. All were dejected at first, sporting various arrays of stinging, painted wounds, which in reality tended to hurt pride more than their bodies. But as the group of fallen, starkly stained individuals sat about on logs within the compound, nursing their wounds, their icy wall of independence and self-sufficiency began to melt away.

While most were sullen at first, or simply angry with themselves for losing the war-games, a warm, friendly bond began to form as each candidate was slowly coaxed into telling their tragic story. And as each new painted victim arrived at the camp, beaten and demoralized, they found themselves buoyed and supported by a growing number of sympathetic, wounded friends.

Virginia Linford and her golden-girl assistant, Debra Birch, and the elfin Penny White remained with the group, saying little, but taking in all the stories of events that had transpired. They offered little or no consolation with regard to the candidates’ wounds, but simply listened to their stories and noted how each person had performed, whether with intelligence, insanity or ineptitude.



Sandra chose to run rather than to stand and face her pursuer. She guessed that Stone could only shoot accurately at her within twenty meters. He was twice that distance away, and besides, she did not trust her own ability to wage a shooting match. No, there was a *better way*.

She screamed with fright as she turned to run, oblivious to the possibility of what other enemies she might alert to her presence. The trees were not so dense as on other parts of the island, but there were plenty of huge, black boulders jutting meters out of the soft earth to provide cover. The more important question was whether she could run fast enough to stay ahead of her enemy, than whether or not she could find cover.

She heard a sharp crack and then a splatting sound as something struck a boulder just behind her and to the right. Again a small shrill squeal came from her mouth as she realized that Stone must have fired into the air, allowing the paintball to strike as it fell. She ran with almost blind terror, realizing just how lucky she had been. Distance was not the foolproof ally that she had hoped.

For three hours Stone had watched the slow procession of disappointed candidates wandering back toward the second camp where Debra Birch had ordered the '*losers*' to meet. Stone himself had accounted for Michelle and Tony, each having given him a dejected scowl that said "*did you have to?*" when he had shot them.

Michelle had been easy, cracking twigs and not looking or listening closely enough for possible enemies, and Stone had taken great pleasure in simply stepping out and shooting her front on. He could have shot her in the back, but chose to confront instead, shooting her twice in the chest as she approached him. Frontal assault or not, it barely seemed fair, since she was so out of her depth in the war-games. Tony, however, had been much more warlike in his approach, quietly creeping his way around. His scalp had come only in a shoot out with Stone, who had carefully waited for a small window of opportunity before claiming victory.

Then, of course, he had also had the pleasure of shooting Nick.

He had also seen Jenny, Erin, Michael, Peter and Linda as the slow procession of brightly painted candidates made their way back to the camp. Strangely though, that group had been sharing some quiet laughter as they walked, something that pleased him. He hoped that Sandra would still be able to laugh when he shot her.

Stone now knew there could only be Sandra and possibly, Brice left. It had surprised him little to see that many of the fallen sported paint stains on their backs. Indeed, in some cases, that was the *only* place they had been shot. Oh well, *business was business*, he told himself.

Only the fate of Brice and Sandra had escaped him, leaving him unsure of the true scope of the dangers before him. Allowing for the likelihood that Brice may have been shot by this stage, it stood to reason that Sandra may have been his last remaining target. Fear of failure made him want to move more cautiously, but the wait had been long and painful, and now he could smell blood, and the likelihood of victory. He sprinted after the panting, terrified redhead.

As he ran, Stone realized what a rush the chase gave him.

Adrenalin had raced through his veins a hundred times that day, at every cracking twig and every rustling bird, and most of all when he had gone in for the 'kill'. The competition had proven highly exhilarating, facing the prospect of 'killing' his colleagues or 'being killed' by them. The pain he had felt at the prospect of having to shoot Katrina was also heavy in his mind, but as he ran he felt the familiar surge of excitement once more.

As he gained on the panicking woman running wildly ahead of him, Stone realized just how strong the desire within him had grown. He could taste the final victory, and the feeling of urgency within him was almost beyond his control. There was a *primal, animal instinct* driving him on without care or caution, which would not allow him to stop until he had caught and dispensed with his victim.

He suddenly realized that he was beyond compassion or remorse. Regardless of Sandra's obvious fear, he would not cease chasing her until he had caught her – and *finished* her. Chasing his pretty young quarry through the trees, knowing full well that she was panicking and vulnerable, Stone realized that he could never give up the chase.

He had no thought of actually *harming* her, and yet there was an urge within him that would not be denied. The realization was deep, and struck him with great force, even as he ran. She was his *prey*. She was his *enemy*. And most of all, he would *not* quit until he had removed her from the game. *She was his!*

And there was a burning secondary thought too.

If he *didn't* shoot her, then she would likely shoot him, and facing the shame of being shot by the screaming redhead was not a prospect he could endure. Besides, the prospect of being able to show Virginia Linford that her Amazons were not invincible was a powerful temptation. He *needed* to defeat Sandra at *any cost*.

Stone took aim as he ran, then fired again, now drawing to within a range from which he could perhaps hope to at least hit close to what he aimed for. But still he missed. A tree trunk exploded with pale blue mist beside Sandra's left shoulder as she sped past it. She did not attempt to

face Stone, or even to take a wild shot behind her. Instead, still panting wildly, she occasionally let out a small scream as she blundered on between the trees and boulders.

And then Sandra suddenly stopped running, and slipped behind a large, lone boulder. She took cover, peering over the top of it at Stone, who instinctively slowed his pace to a walk, knowing that she could not escape now. She stared about, her eyes begging for mercy, her breath coming in rapid, forced gasps.

There were many rocks and trees, and the vegetation was becoming thicker again, providing suitable cover for an enemy, so Stone stopped and spent many long seconds crouching, flicking his eyes from Sandra's boulder to the bushes about him and back again, searching for anything that moved. He knew by instinct that wherever Sandra was, it was likely that Brice was close by – unless he had already been removed from the game. Stone had no way of knowing. He searched cautiously, but no other enemy existed. Apart from Sandra's heavy breathing, he could hear nothing.

"I surrender, John," Sandra finally offered. "Just don't shoot me. *Please*. I give up."

He continued to search the area for enemies, barely heeding her words. *This* was not the way he wanted to take her scalp. He preferred the prospect of a fight, but knew she would not give him one. She was frightened. She was scared. She feared the sting of the paint. At no time had she even dared to fire a shot at him, not even a speculator over her shoulder as she ran. Sandra had shown herself unwilling to fight, and Stone knew this would be sickeningly easy. He had always known she was more suited to an office than a battleground. She hadn't even put up a decent chase.

Just for a moment he realized how one-sided the battle was. Even so, the urge he had felt as they ran still boiled in his veins, and he knew that one way or another, he would have to take her scalp – her *life*. Even if she raised her hands, he would have to shoot her. No mercy and no prisoners, *those* were the only rules. She had to die.

It was typical Linford.

"You're not making this any easier," he suggested, hoping that she would fire on him, so that he could at least be seen as defending himself.

He moved forward, always ready to return fire should Sandra opt to try one last desperate effort. She stood upright behind the boulder, revealing her head and upper chest as clear targets, but still she did not fight. She raised a slender arm from behind the boulder, her weapon held high, her hand away from the trigger so as to prove that she did not intend to try to shoot. They faced each other, just five meters between them.

"Please don't shoot me, John," she repeated, and her plastic glasses glimmered a little in the

afternoon sun.

He pursed his lips as she held her weapon high. Stone wondered what to do. She was vulnerable and weak and he suddenly realized that while part of the reason for the paintball war-games was to test skills and courage, it also served to test friendships and to reveal the killer instinct within such confrontations. *And he could feel it.* It boiled within him like a roaring beast. He *had* to shoot her.

No, he *wanted* to shoot her. Shooting Sandra, while cowardly, was necessary. *Someone* had to die. And, in a very sick and twisted sense, it would not only be easy, but strangely satisfying. *She is the enemy*, he thought. *Just kill her.* It might even be fun...

The sudden stinging pain in his back was accompanied by a definite crack, but did not even begin to compare with the anguish he felt. Two more cracks were accompanied by two more stinging thuds, and Stone stumbled, then fell. Seconds later he turned to face his killer.

His mind burned with disappointment. It felt so unfair. He had so much wanted to claim the prize he had earned. He had *found* Sandra, *chased* her, and *caught* her. He *deserved her!* But now he was destined to miss out on claiming her at the final moment.

And worse still, he had lost the war-games.

Brice stood just five meters behind him, and came strolling casually up, his weapon raised high in a joyous salute to his own victory. He extended his left hand to Stone in a friendly gesture, waiting to help him up.

"You were right, Sandy!" he sprouted happily, his eyes dancing from the woman he loved to John Stone. "*It did work!* I didn't really think it would, but you were right. We got him."

Stone turned to check Sandra's reaction, and her look of satisfaction told the story. His disappointment burst afresh with new dimensions as he realized how he had been set up. They had worked together and had duped him. Sandra had been leading him into a trap all along. Her screams, her fear – it was all an act. All the while he had been thinking of himself as the hunter, when he was actually being led into a trap. He felt sick with bitter disappointment.

"You worked together!" he protested, shaking his head. "*That's cheating!*" They both shrugged, but showed no remorse.

"Not cheating," corrected Brice, his hand extended down, his weapon pointed up. "At *no time* did they say that we couldn't work together. So *that's* not cheating. All they said was that we weren't allowed to shoot anyone once we were shot. *That* was the only thing. We got you. You'll just have to live with it. We definitely *got you.*"

Stone stared up at him, bitterly disappointed. They had twisted the intent of the rules for certain, but had not actually cheated. He snorted, then smiled weakly up at Brice, conceding defeat.

As Stone reached his hand up to take hold of Brice's, a sharp *thwack* beside his left ear sent him automatically dropping to the ground again. Even as he fell he could hear two more sharp smacks. Upon turning his head to face Brice again, he saw the familiar painted mist hanging in the air and three large pink stains on Brice's chest, and a look of perplexed disappointment on the young man's face.

"*What the...?*" Brice's voice trailed off, and he never completed his sentence.

Sandra squealed happily as she danced about, explaining her actions between gasps of satisfied laughter.

"*Not cheating!*" she giggled. "*We never said that we wouldn't shoot each other – only that we'd help each other! Yes! Oh, yes! I win!*"

Brice leveled his weapon as if he might shoot his one true love, and though he would not have, Stone pushed the barrel away from Sandra's direction.

"And she got you," Stone said happily. "*She got you.*"

CHAPTER 8

The *autopsy* following the war-games was merciless and thorough.

The group sat on logs within the confines of the second camp, all faces except Sandra's showing some degree of disappointment, staring dejectedly at the ground as the plight of each was investigated, and the candidate was berated accordingly by management. The wounds of each were analyzed and the killer in each case identified.

Linda particularly was feeling down, and her failure to claim even a single scalp was more than adequately pointed out to her. To add insult to injury, she had received numerous bruises and scratches, the very things she had been afraid of. Debra Birch was particularly scathing in her summation of Linda's performance.

Michelle, who had proven an easy 'kill' for Stone, waited fearfully, knowing that she too had not acted with either bravery or skill. However, when it came time for Stone's testimony, he simply lied about the girl's performance. Michelle's eyes rose from the sand as he described how she had

put up a valiant effort. In Stone's version she had fallen only because other sounds in the forest had distracted her. Had it not been for those sounds, Stone himself might have been her victim. She allowed the tiniest flutter of her eyelids to silently thank him, a bitter attack from Debra Birch having been narrowly derailed.

Nick's performance was questioned, despite the fact that he had claimed Katrina's scalp. Upon interrogation though, rather than Debra showing disapproval of him, it was *he* who showed anger. His pride was still smarting, and he now refused to speak a word to his colleagues, especially John Stone. Instead, he accused Stone and Katrina of collaborating, plotting to trap him, a claim to which Debra Birch did not react.

Katrina received one of the few scoldings of her time on Valkyrie. She had not claimed a scalp, being among the first to fall. She simply listened quietly as Debra expressed her disappointment.

When it came time for Debra to analyze John Stone's demise, he said as little as possible, hoping to avoid letting either Debra Birch or Virginia Linford know that Sandra and Brice had acted as a team. Since fraternization between executives was very much taboo, it seemed unwise to hold up a flag. After all, Jenny Walsh had 'died' in similar circumstances, killed when surrounded. It was not difficult for Stone to withhold the full truth about his own downfall. Brice followed on by saying little more than how he had been shot by Sandra while dispensing with Stone.

Sandra, however, had a *very* different plan.

Both Stone and Brice studied the ground intently as she openly spoke of her collaboration with Brice. She told of how it had been her idea to work together to trap John Stone. And then, when Brice had done the difficult part, she had simply claimed the final victory. An eerie silence fell over the group as they waited for Debra Birch to explode at the revelation. But instead, Debra fell silent and turned to face her boss.

Virginia Linford remained calm as always, unmoved by the revelation. For many long seconds Sandra's fellow colleagues waited, knowing that the boss might swing either way at the thought of one of her prized female candidates collaborating during trials that were designed to be done individually. Worse still, Sandra had collaborated with a *man*. But as Virginia considered the outcome of the war-games, a wide, approving smile slowly dawned across her face.

She clearly *was* pleased, and the group breathed a collective and silent sigh. Each knew that Sandra's deviousness may have risked Virginia's ire, but the risk had proven worthwhile. Rather than chastising or punishing Sandra, Virginia congratulated her for her clever use of resources.

“A woman must use *all* of her abilities – in *every* situation confronting her,” Virginia Linford gloated quietly, elated that one of her girls had won the games. “You simply used your femininity to your advantage, Sandra. I’m very pleased.”

Each of the men present wished deeply that the outcome might have been different, if only to anger Virginia Linford. Each man knew the reason for Virginia’s joy. Not only had Sandra ensured that a *woman* had won the war-games, but she had done so by deceitfully manipulating a *man* – an added bonus for the boss.



As the group left the south-eastern camp, Stone glanced at Tiny Island, noting that the river of gushing, shark infested saltwater had receded, revealing a twenty-meter stretch of water not much deeper than a man’s knees. Something about the island fascinated him, and he found himself wanting to explore the forbidden place.

Suddenly though, his interest was heightened by something else.

He saw a flash of movement, perhaps of very pale gold or pale yellow. *Something* had moved within the swaying grasses – he was sure of it. Stone stood transfixed as the remainder of the group began to trudge off without him, and Katrina drew near his side, exhorting him to keep up.

“Debra’s in a foul mood, John,” she urged. “Come on. Don’t give her a reason to threaten you.”

Stone nodded, but did not return her gaze. Instead he remained staring at where he had seen the movement. Now there was nothing but a gentle and lazy swaying of the grass tips in the wind. Before Katrina could repeat her plea, Debra’s demanding voice rose again, and Stone fought down the urge to react.

“*Move it* Stone! *You too*, Katrina!” Stone fought an urge to flare at Virginia’s personal aide, and instead pointed defiantly with a finger.

“There’s something over there,” he protested. “Something – *or someone*.”

“I’ve already told you, Mister Stone,” Debra cautioned, retracing her steps as though to make her point more strongly. “Tiny Island is off limits to *all*. *No one* is allowed over there.” She softened her tone as if sensing how close she was to having Stone react. “Come on, Stone. If anyone *did* go over there, they would not be staying on Valkyrie – and that’s *if* they survived the sharks, the stingers and the oysters. Come on, man. Get moving.”

Her command sounded more like a request this time, and it was enough to placate Stone, who felt tired and angry. Besides, he did not want to do anything that might imperil Katrina's chances of success in the trials, let alone his own. There was too much at stake.

"What did you see?" asked Katrina as the two fell in at the tail of the group.

"Something moved," he answered. "I don't know what it was, but I definitely saw something move. It was... pale and..." He held up cupped hands to show an item about the size of a small melon. "Whatever it was, I don't think it was part of the island. I don't know. That island might be off limits, but I'm sure I saw *someone* or *something* over there."

He shook his head, annoyed at not being able to investigate the thing. They both glanced back as they followed the trudging group. "If it was a person," insisted Stone, "then that's the second time someone has been sneaking around, spying on us!"

The walk back to the camp seemed oppressively long to the tired, aching and exhausted candidates. Nick remained cool and aloof, especially toward Stone, who wondered what the remainder of their time on the island would be like with a roommate who showed so much anger. He found himself struggling to force down frustration and anger. In his heart he felt certain that it would only be a matter of time before one of the candidates would crack. Just one poorly timed provocation was all it would take, he knew, and *someone* would surely explode with pent up fury.

He hoped it would not be him. And so, *Nick's* anger and coldness was not the only thought churning about in Stone's mind.

His thoughts flicked regularly to the hardships and rigors of training, or as he preferred to think of the course, *boot camp*. Linford's test was proving more demanding than he had imagined. His heart troubled him too, tugging him relentlessly between his love for Katrina, his old and trusted friend who he loved deeply, and for Mary, the beautiful boat captain. Mary would always remain an unknown longing within his heart unless he settled the question. Nick's anger only added to the frustration and anguish Stone felt.

And then there was the nagging question of the person or thing hiding on Tiny Island. Whether the thing had been a cap, a fair head of hair, or some other pale thing, the only possible explanation Stone could arrive at was that there had been a human presence on the island. And *this* on an island that the candidates had been expressly forbidden to visit. It ate at him. Reason gave way to paranoia, fuelled by tiredness.

He *knew* what he had seen.

And he had seen a spy.



Nick pushed past Stone without a word as he strode from the steaming shower. Sleeping quarters were set out to house two candidates, each with its own bathroom, the water heated by solar panels. Nick had showered long, purposely taking his time, knowing that Stone would be tired and desperate to clean up and feel human again. He exited the bathroom, pushing past his roommate, and dressing without a word. Stone refused to be drawn, and said nothing. When he finished showering, Nick was gone.

Mealtime was more relaxed than usual that evening, and the group of tired and battered aspirants pushed their tables together in the eating hall so that they could dine as one. The day's arduous war-games, and the way that the candidates had been forced to pit their skills against each other had strangely united them.

Deep down, none was in a hurry to have to *kill* again, and new levels of respect and friendship had been forged. Frequent and repeated attacks by management on most of them throughout the course for one failure or another had shown the candidates that they had a common enemy – and it *wasn't* each other. Even the distant Erin Brown joined the group, and for the first time throughout the course her colleagues had the pleasure of seeing her brown face warming to them.

Erin spoke often that night of Jenny Walsh's wild headlong dash into death, and the group could see how impressed Erin was. No one, least of all Erin, had expected such bravery or manic actions from the pretty, quiet Jenny. There was not one who was not amazed at the blonde's crazed, wild exploits.

Unwilling to be the only one on his own, Nick also joined the group, though he took pains to position himself at the far end of one side of the joined tables, away from John Stone and Katrina Redding. His anger still smoldered, but the united candidates did their best to accept him.

Several of the group uttered hushed apologies, sorry for having shot their new friends. Voices were more jovial than they had ever been, though they became even more hushed than usual once Virginia Linford, Debra Birch and Penny White entered the room. The day's events had the clear effect of unifying the group, with the natural side effect that management had become even more of an enemy. Virginia Linford did not object to the repositioning of tables, and on the contrary, she seemed content to sit at a distance, observing the group's newfound closeness.

Aware of the hushed apologies being offered, and that management was obviously not being allowed to hear the true feelings of the group, Erin Brown suddenly made an effort to give the group something else to talk about, albeit related to their current, morbid states. Her voice was somewhat satirical in her approach, attempting to make light of their plight.

“Well, I don’t know about you lot,” she said aloud so as to end the hushed whispers. “But I gave up a lot to be here. I could have been married by now, you know. Oh, yeah. A big, black hunk of a man he was – with the keys to Daddy’s business, too. I could have been a *made* woman by now. I could have stayed home and lived a life of leisure.” Surprised eyes turned to watch as she shared what was without doubt a painful part of her life, and while she made light of it, there was no doubt that she had suffered.

“But I chose to make it on my own,” she continued. “So I left him – Danny was his name. Left him in my dust. Left him so that I could crawl around in the grass and have guys like you shoot me in the back! Oh yeah, *good plan, Erin!*” She laughed aloud as she chastised herself, and while those present enjoyed her sarcasm, they could also see that she had suffered genuine loss.

“That’s what it cost *me* to be here,” she said flatly. Then she eyed the group one at a time until she had selected a victim to continue the conversation. Her piercing gaze fell upon Tony. “So come on Tony – what did *you* give up to come here?”

Tony responded without having to consider the question at all.

“For me it was my dad’s business,” he said. “My father put me through business school, paid all the bills, did it all. Of course he figured I’d go back and take over the good ol’ construction business he’d spent his whole life building from the ground up. Trouble was that by the time I got through with all my training, he was dying. The long and short is that while he was sick, the business went downhill fast. By the time I got out, there wasn’t much left to save.”

His new friends could see the secret pain etched in his face – just as they had with Erin. He pursed his lips as he confessed the disappointment that dogged him.

“I always thought I’d return the hero and save the Old Man’s business – but I was too late. I mean, I didn’t want to be in construction anyway, but I would like to have been able to help my dad. As it was, he died knowing that all he ever worked for was going down the gurgler – and I couldn’t help him – *didn’t* help him. Would have been nice to be a hero, you know?”

The wistfulness of his words gave a hint of his sense of failure. He quickly put on a brave smile to expel the painful memories. “But that was years ago and now I’m part of something a whole lot bigger than dad’s company. This time I don’t plan to fail. And when I *win* this

competition thing – you can all come visit me – as long as you have an appointment.”

His comment brought the desired reaction from around the table as the room erupted in joking and sarcastic comments. Erin patted Tony on the back as an expression of gratitude.

“You see,” she grinned. “Underneath that jovial fool is a real human being. You can be quite normal if you just try.”

As the room fell quiet again she said more seriously, “Don’t let it eat you, Tony. You said it yourself – you were too late learning what you needed to know to help your dad. You’ll just have to be a hero some other way.” Again she broke the mood of the group by moving on to the next person. “What about you, Katrina?”

Katrina’s face fell slightly as she composed her response.

“Mine’s a sad story too,” she said, a brave smile unable to hide her pain. “For me it’s just a case of making up for what has been lost. I can’t believe I’m going to tell *this* to a bunch of people I barely know.” She glanced at Stone as if searching for his approval, and a simple nod was all it took to convince her to continue.

“I did well enough at Linford’s that my little sister took up working there too. She was young and maybe a bit naïve, but she was a good kid and I loved her.” Katrina choked back tears and emotion that threatened to end her story, but she struggled to go on. “One day she... was... *murdered*. She was killed. Just like that. One day, for no good reason, someone... just *killed her*.”

She shook her head, still searching to understand.

“She wasn’t robbed. She wasn’t... raped. She was just... *killed*.” Her eyes glistened as she gazed from one silent face to another. “She was a good kid, you know. Simone had cystic fibrosis, and it was just... eating her away. I know it was only a matter of time and she would have died anyway – we *both* knew that. But would she let me look after her? *No!* She insisted in doing what her *big sister* was doing, so she tried to make her way with the company just like me. In time I would have had to give it all up to take care of her. We even talked about that.”

Katrina looked distant as she struggled with her pain, and such an unnecessary loss.

“I mean, she would have died anyway – but why did she have to die like that? Why did she have to die with a knife in her back? I loved her so much. I would have given it all up for a chance to take care of her – *I still would*. But one day it was just too late.”

She stopped, suddenly realizing how much of her personal pain she had just dumped on her unsuspecting companions, and she tried to wipe away her tears. Katrina sighed, realizing how she had silenced the table. She rallied, putting on a brave smile, not wanting to drown the group in her

personal sorrow.

“So anyway, here I am because I’ve got nowhere else to go. And now you know why I have trouble shooting my friends – even with *paintballs*. I don’t like death, even when it’s just a game. It’s still a bit too real for me.” Her eyes stared at her fiddling fingers on the table. “Simone wasn’t just my sister. She was my friend.”

The group remained in an uncomfortable silence for a time, with even Nick’s face softening as he remembered how he had shot Katrina in the back that day. He shuffled uneasily, but still refused to join the conversation. Erin turned her gaze upon Stone.

“*Damn*, we’re a sad bunch,” she said, trying to help the group recover. “What about you, John Stone? What sad story have you got to tell us?”

Stone patted Katrina’s shoulder as a gesture of support as he responded to Erin’s question. While he was in no hurry to tell his own story, he thought it might help take the pressure off Katrina if he spoke.

“I might have made a joke,” he answered, “but considering Katrina’s answer, I won’t. My wife and I both worked for Linford’s. She lived for the company – I didn’t. One night she screamed at me, jumped in her car and drove away. Drove right off a cliff not too far from where we lived. Just went crazy, I guess.

“Virginia and I tried to help her. It wasn’t as though she didn’t have people she could have turned to. But Kim wouldn’t listen to anyone. She was *obsessed* with success. They never found her body...”

His eyes lost all emotion as his face twisted, his head nodding toward the Valkyrie coastline. “Lots of sharks there too,” he said.

“Oh *come on, man*,” said Erin, trying to mix her tone between respect and sarcasm. “Doesn’t *anyone* here have a *happy* story?” Stone’s response came before any others could interrupt.

“You didn’t let me finish, Erin,” he said. “Mine’s *not* a sad story. That was just the beginning. The point is that Virginia saw what happened, and has been a support, you could say, ever since. So now I’m here on my own merits – not my wife’s or anyone else’s. So I guess I’m just like all of you. This is *my* chance to make something of myself, and to forget the past. Mine’s not a sad story, Erin.”

“Glad to hear *that*,” she said. “So – who’s next?”

The stories continued for some time, with each candidate revealing to some degree their individual pain and past. And while the business prowess of each person present could never be

doubted, understanding the forces that drove them helped each person to appreciate their new friends and opponents. Considering all they had suffered, clearly none of the group would give up the goal of success without a considerable fight.

Only Nick and Jenny shied away from telling their stories. Joining the group remained the only concession Nick would make. His mood remained distant and surly for the most part, choosing to listen to conversations, but not to join them, and occasionally becoming more sullen when the group would laugh together. And when even the pretty Michelle tried to coax him to tell his story, he refused. Jenny, on the other hand, was friendly and appreciative of the personal revelations. Still, when prompted for her own tale, she fell nervously silent.

“Oh come on, Girl,” urged Erin. “We’ve all had to tell our stories. You’ve *gotta* tell us! What could be any worse than the stuff we’ve already heard? Come on. *Please*.” Having already failed to coax Nick’s story from him, Erin didn’t really expect Jenny to answer, and was pleasantly surprised when the blonde woman responded, albeit with considerable caution.

“Look, guys,” said Jenny in a hushed voice. “I really appreciate your honesty tonight – all of you. It’s just that I had to... pay a *really high price* to be here, and I just don’t...” She trailed off, unsure of how to explain. For a moment it appeared that her eyes were glazing over, but she suddenly toughened.

“Two generations back, my family lived on a dirt floor and whatever the land would give us. Only for the generosity of *those two* generations, who *insisted* that I got a university degree, that I’m not *still* living that life too. So here I am, and I’ve spent my *whole* working life at Linford’s. Now those who paid such a high price to get me here are all dead, so the company *is my life*. I’ve given it *everything*. Every working day and most of the nights too. I’ve *really* poured myself into it because it’s all I’ve got left in the world. *That’s* why I fought so hard today.”

She rubbed her forehead to punctuate her meaning, then continued.

“I’m gathering that all of you paid a pretty high price to be here in one way or another,” she said, “but I just know that... I made some mistakes along the way, and it took a *pretty major effort* to get to this point. I suppose I’ve given the company my *soul* – that’s what it is – and now I’ve paid such a high price that I can’t even *talk* about it anymore.”

Her eyes lowered to the table as she considered her words, and then qualified her remarks as best she could. When she spoke, her words were so whispered that it was clear she did not want management to hear.

“I’ve had to do some *pretty awful things* to get here,” she confessed. “I’m not proud of

myself anymore. I admit that. But all I ever thought about was... *winning*. That's *all* there has ever been for me. I've always done *whatever I had to do* to win. I just keep remembering my grandparents and my parents and that filthy, dirt floor. The company *is* my life, and now that I've committed myself to it, there's just no going back. Sorry guys, it's just too hard to talk about."

She smiled at those she had so openly confronted in the war-games that day, and each nodded their understanding.

"It's so bad now that I can't even *talk* about all the garbage I've had to wade through just for a chance at the big-time. I'm sorry." Her words were painfully honest, but left no doubt that she would not be drawn any further. Heads nodded as each candidate was left with no choice but to accept Jenny's decision not to tell.

When the personal stories were done, Stone's heart raced as he saw the petit, white-clad figure of his sailboat dreams, Captain Mary Stewart enter the room. Mary's white uniform was not as crisp as usual, smeared in places with stark oily stains that indicated she had been laboring somewhere. She shot Stone a quick, barely perceptible smile, then sat dutifully at the same table as management, her head bowed close to Virginia's as she related some news. Stone tried to study the situation without making his interest too obvious, and decided to question Mary on the matter when he could.

He could ask her later that night, he thought – later, when he would meet Mary at the beach just as they had arranged. His mind wandered to the prospect of seeing her again, and then to the barrage of twisting emotions he felt. Then something else caught his attention. Whatever news Mary relayed, it suddenly turned Virginia's face red with anger. Virginia thought for a time, then issued some order to Mary, who dutifully left.

After that, Virginia's face showed no further pleasure that evening.



Stone could not resist Mary's kiss.

He leaned closer and they embraced at length. He cradled her head in his hands, relishing the touch of her lips and the softness and smell of her long blonde hair. She was warm and loving, and in the moonlight beneath the coconut palms, she was nothing short of angelic to behold. But in the end he could not deny the cold, heavy weight of conscience that assailed him, and it was he who broke their embrace. She sensed his reticence in a moment, and her blue eyes glistened in the

moonlight as she stared quizzically into his face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, imagining his hesitation to be a result of his past.

Her eyes followed him as he blinked and looked away, and she refused to let him go. He could feel her stare follow him, and then heard her make a small joke. She motioned at the ocean, the palms and the white sand sparkling in the moonlight.

“What’s wrong, John?” she asked lightly, “Is the setting *not romantic enough* for you?”

He smiled weakly.

“It’s beautiful and so are you,” he said honestly. He touched her soft cheek, then stroked her long, lustrous hair. She was a vision of beauty. *No wonder he had been so overwhelmed by her*, he thought. Unlike Kim, Mary did not reject the ocean that was so precious to him, but rather, she *embraced it*. She was full of life, and totally exciting. Indeed, she was completely intoxicating. But alas, she could also be easily hurt.

They all could...

“You’re everything I hoped for,” he said. “You’ve got me shaking here. No. It’s not the setting and it’s *not* you.”

She remained staring, waiting.

“Then *what is it?*” she asked, wondering for the first time if perhaps his memories of his late wife were *not* the problem. “Are you worried about your course? I’m well aware that you’ll be expelled if you’re caught with me. Hey, I’ll lose *my job too*, I suspect. *Is that it?*”

Rather than wait for an answer, she added another touch of humor, believing that she now knew the problem. “Look on the bright side – if they *do* send you home, it’ll probably be *me* that gets to take you there. Then, if you want, we can elope with Linford’s boat and disappear forever. What do you say?”

“Sounds great,” he replied, and he meant it. However, his silence assured that her presumption as to the cause of the problem had been incorrect, and the smile ran away from her face as she waited for a heavier, more serious truth.

“I just can’t *do this*,” he explained hesitantly, and then he launched into the best and only defense he could think of. “I haven’t even *thought* about being with a woman since my wife died, Mary. And you’re *everything* I would have ever looked for – *if* I had been looking. But, I...” He fumbled, not able to bring himself to tell her the entire truth.

“But I just need time, that’s all. We’re both interested, but I’m not going to rush this. I’m sorry, but I’m... just not ready for this. And I sure as heck don’t want to hurt you. You don’t

deserve that. Hey, I don't even know my own mind. I just need a little time, that's all."

She was surprised, but handled his desire to slow down with understanding. She smiled bravely, and then held his hands.

"I won't push you," she said. "But I won't hide from the truth either." She drew a deep breath, preparing to deliver her side of the story, and Stone melted at her words.

"I've been doing this job a long time, John, and I love it. I love the sea and I love being out on it. As far as working goes, I couldn't ask for more. But none of us is getting any younger, and we're both old enough to know that there *is* more to life than just working. I'm nearly *thirty*. I *love* what I do, but I just don't want to be doing it forever – least not *alone*, anyhow. I love my job. I get to see so much... *freedom* – but I'd throw the job in a moment if it meant that I could have someone like you."

She smiled and took a breath, trying desperately to encourage him.

"Look," she continued, "I know you barely know me. But hey, I barely know you too. But it seems to me that we fell for each other pretty quick this last week. I'm not too proud to admit that I get lonely, and I'm not going to hide from that."

Stone braced himself for the ultimate truth, and her words struck deep into him.

"I've seen a lot of men in my job," she said. "They all see the blonde, blue-eyed boat captain and that's *all* they see. But you didn't. I think you might be able to care for me for what I am, not just *how I look*. I don't see *that* kind of man every day. In fact, *never*. Anyway, I'm not too afraid to tell you I think you're one in a million, and I'd like to see you some more – if I can."

He shivered and swallowed, her words striking him hard, and sounding eerily similar to another confession of love he had so recently heard. He felt guilty to the core. In the absence of an answer from him, Mary continued to declare her feelings, and he was almost overwhelmed by her. Instead of uplifting him, each word beat upon him like a heavy, wooden hammer. He felt torn in two, and unable to respond.

"I know it sounds crazy," she confessed, pouring her heart out vulnerably. "But I think... *No, I know – I love you*, John. I've loved you since the first time we spoke and my feelings are not going to change!"

He stared longingly into her eyes, but could not speak. She repeated her confession for effect. "*I love you, John.*"

Thump! Thump! Thump! The hammer drove a wooden spike right through his heart...

Again he could hear Katrina confessing the very same words. His mind raced. *Why?* he

thought! *Why?* How could a man struggle for years alone, only to have *two women* proclaim their love for him in the same week? It was cruel beyond imagination. Deep down he cared for them both. But he knew he would have to choose. And in such matters, there would always be a loser.

Handled poorly, there would be *three losers!*

Touching Mary intimately, or even kissing her suddenly seemed *very* inappropriate. He swallowed again, and caressed one of her soft hands.

"I know," he finally admitted. "Don't take my silence as a rejection, Mary. I care for you. *Very much.* And as you say, ever since the moment I saw you up there on the Mermaid, out in the wind..." He trailed off, realizing that he was avoiding the truth. Then he sighed. He owed her more.

"Mary, it's just, it's just..." He stared into her glistening blue eyes, wanting her so much. *Pain*, he thought. Such weird and horrible pain. But he couldn't betray her. He couldn't betray *either* of them.

"It's just that I can't *use* you," he said. "I haven't loved *anyone* since I lost my wife, and now that I do, I'm just not sure. I want you more than you can imagine, but if..." He paused, then blurted out only half his fear. "I might only be *using* you, and I don't want to do that."

She smiled weakly, unsure of what he was really saying.

"I don't mind being used, right now," she said honestly. "Not by you."

"I do," he shot back resolutely.

"That's a pity," she replied, a delightful smile blossoming over her pretty face, and betraying the first of several tears that began to meander down her cheeks. Her next comment was somewhere between a serious plea and another humorous tension breaker. "A pity, really, because I *was* going to ask you back to inspect my boat tonight. I thought maybe you could have checked to see if all my gear was in shipshape condition."

He laughed lightly to release the tension, flashing his eyes at her.

"Trust me," he promised with a grin. "It is. It all is."

He groaned and gave her a remorseful look, shaking his head. She knew her offer – however serious – was one he would like to have accepted, but she could also see that some deep reason was keeping him from doing so. While disappointed, she was pleased that he cared enough not to mistreat her, and his decency only served to cement in her mind that he was indeed the man she wanted. His reticence was not rejection, she thought, but rather was indeed proof of his feelings for her.

Stone clenched his fists, battling.

"I... just... can't... use... you, Mary," he grated firmly.

Mary smiled bravely, then kissed him again.

"Oh well," she replied, her tone changing to something more factual, as though she was simply recounting news to him. "It looks like now I'll be able to give you time to change your mind. Seems like I won't be going *anywhere* for a while."

Stone suddenly remembered Mary's conversation with Virginia Linford during mealtime, and Virginia's angry reaction.

"What do you mean?" he asked, engrossed by the prospect of anything that could keep Mary on the island. "I saw you telling Linford something. What happened?"

"Let's just say that it's probably a *good thing* you don't want to come back and check on my gear. Someone sabotaged the *Mermaid*," she answered, a small look of concern in her eyes. "They beat up on the fuel system, and she's not going anywhere."

"Mary!" His reaction was terse and shocked, his concern for her immediately evident. *"Who? Why? Are you in danger?"*

"No," she said dismissively. "Well – I sure hope not. No. The boat wasn't locked, but it will be from now on. It's probably just that big security guy... *Corbett*. He's been hanging around like a bad smell. I think he likes me."

"Hardly a surprise," noted Stone, his mind mulling over the possible implications. "Mary, how can you just dismiss this? Corbett's a big man. And besides, it could be *anyone*..."

"And they'll get a fight they won't forget," she asserted. "I've got two cans of Mace, and a pretty mean kick. Whoever it was, is gonna get more than they bargained on if they come back. It's all right, John. I'm not worried. If it makes you feel any better, I'll keep all the doors locked during the nights. *Okay?*"

"Please," agreed Stone, his face still lined with concern. "What about sleeping in one of the cabins with the rest of us?"

"No," she assured him. "Not an option. I don't think there are any empty rooms, and besides, I'm safe. And I'm not leaving the *Mermaid* for *anyone*. I'll sleep with my Mace. *Okay?* Anyway, they broke a fuel line, *that's all*. No one's tried to hurt me. And they won't. It's just a fuel line."

Mary shrugged, brushing aside the deeper threat of what such an obvious act of sabotage might mean, and choosing to concentrate on the positives instead.

“So it looks like all those people I was supposed to run home tomorrow won’t be going anywhere.” She smiled broadly, refusing to acknowledge the obvious question or motive of the visitor who had been on her boat.

“And nor will I,” she said happily.



Jo Corbett swaggered leisurely toward the end of the dock. His muscular frame was easily recognizable, even though the light illuminating the middle of the dock was dim. The size and the obvious strength of his powerful body would have left no doubt even in poorer light.

Corbett noticed that the light at the far end of the dock was out. He’d been meaning to fix it – he’d get Jeff King on it tomorrow. Mary’s *Mermaid* nestled silently in the pale light of the rising moon, a glistening, bobbing attractive vessel, *for more reasons than one...* But it was not a malfunctioning light that caught Corbett’s eye.

He had seen something far more interesting...

He strolled toward the *Mermaid*, his huge right hand coming to rest cautiously on the butt of his .38 automatic, and he unclipped the small leather safety strap, ensuring that he could retrieve the weapon in a moment should the need arise. He smirked and put out his chest as he strode. *No one* was going to vandalize or steal *anything* – not while Jo Corbett was on duty.

The dark figure was mostly hidden as it stepped down from the vessel on to the timber dock. Moonlight had bathed the figure while on the deck of the luxurious boat, and movement had made the person easy to see, but now, in the shadows beside the *Mermaid*, and without light from the last, broken dock lamp, Corbett could see very little.

As the security man continued, he realized that the prowler either didn’t see his approach, or didn’t care. The latter would mean that the night wanderer was none other than the lovely Mary Stewart, and this thought sent blood pulsing through his veins. He had dreamed of a night meeting with Mary. The former would mean that he would likely nab whoever had been responsible for damaging the *Mermaid*. Either way, Corbett figured he couldn’t lose.

On the one hand he might get to enjoy a liaison with the elusive captain, and on the other he might earn Virginia Linford’s approval. If *that* happened, perhaps this temporary position on Valkyrie might become permanent, instead of he and Jeff King only acting as replacements for the usual security staff while the test was on. The thoughts pleased him, and he moved quietly toward

his prey.

Corbett approached, his hand still resting on the butt of his weapon, his face stern, and his body tense with caution. For such a large man he had a disproportionate ability to move quietly, and his approach went without sound or warning. But, turning to face the security chief as he neared, the wanderer showed no surprise at all, clearly having already seen him and well aware of his presence. Instead of retracting in fear, the prowler stepped up close to Corbett, unafraid. A dark parka, with the hood pulled up over the wearer's head obscured the person's identity until very close, and Corbett's face softened as he finally beheld his visitor. His hand dropped from his weapon, and he gave a hint of a grin, a soft snort emanating from his nostrils.

He perched both hands on his hips, which along with the snort, seemed to indicate a passive rebuke from the security chief, but it was clear that the admonishment was only token.

"And what are *you* doing out here so late at night?" he asked.

CHAPTER 9

DAY 7

The next morning Virginia Linford's mood was not as tranquil as her colleagues had come to know it.

She normally remained composed through most events, even when Penny White or Debra Birch would launch into a fit of angry scolding of a candidate for some minor offence. Virginia's iron composure and matching poker face were among the traits that had made her so successful in business, and also which made it so difficult for a candidate to gauge his or her success. The boss would never share her thoughts until her decision was made. Normally she was a rock of silent thought, never giving away her intentions or her thoughts.

But not today.

Stone saw her at a distance early that morning and knew immediately that the boss was upset, and he felt sure he knew the reason. Sabotage of the *Mermaid* was no small matter. He wondered how Mary Stewart was faring, and he could no longer concentrate on the sessions. Instead, he was apprehensive, fearing for Mary's safety. But the young captain had refused to listen. Even after such a serious attack she had insisted on locking the hatches and sleeping on board the stricken boat.

Lunchtime saw a weary and dejected group of candidates meander into Anna Smart's canteen. However, copious volumes of Anna's brilliant cooking, washed down with cool fruit juice saw them reviving, and soon the canteen was filled with voices and laughter again. The cook's wonderful culinary skills, coupled with her natural friendliness quickly acted as a remedy for minds tired of enduring Penny White's vitriolic tirades. While Penny possessed a brilliant mind and uncanny business insights, her rapport with her students left much to be desired. Bitter anger toward her was brewing.

Nick Tanner, still foul from losing the war-games, had his bitter disposition made worse by being the recipient of repeated special attention from the petite teacher. It had been all he could do to refrain from abusing Penny in return. Staying the course, and moreover, *winning*, meant everything to Nick, and was the only reason he endured such tongue-lashings from the elfin instructor.

It irked him that after years of training, experience and a proven track record he should have to endure such treatment from her. He barely ate, then strode out of the canteen, still smarting from Penny's abuse. He was unwilling to sit with those who had witnessed his berating. Even with a sympathetic entreaty from Erin Brown, he refused to stop.

"We've all come in for her nastiness," Erin pleaded. "It's just *them* trying to break *us*. It's just part of the test. I hate the witch too. *I'd* like to see her get what's coming, believe me. And I'm as much of a loner as anyone here, but we need to stick together. *Please, don't go, Nick.*"

But Nick would not listen.



Debra's eyes hardened as she listened to Virginia's factual summation of the situation.

"He's destroyed our main radio, and he's taken all the portable ones. He's even taken the mobile phones we confiscated from the candidates," the boss said, anger and bitterness in her voice. "I should expect nothing else from a *man*, should I, Debra?"

Debra Birch wanted to point out the lack of evidence to her boss, but knew *this* was not the time. For the moment, it was safer to let Virginia release her bitterness where she wished – especially if it was not in Debra's direction.

"He's taken *all* the radios, *all* the weapons, the *flares*, and the maps." Virginia's hatred of men was abundantly obvious in her voice as she apportioned blame upon her replacement security

chief. “I don’t know *what* Corbett is up to, but when this is over I’ll see to it that he never works *anywhere* again. Hell! He won’t even *have children*, let alone work again!”

She paused, thinking, the pampered skin on her face becoming uncharacteristically lined. “Not that it matters. I assume you put in a call to the mainland last night about the damage to the *Mermaid*.”

A nod accompanied Debra’s hurried explanation.

“Our plane will be here with the parts for the *Mermaid* in two days. They say it’ll take them that long to find them. And I know you didn’t want the test being interfered with, so I took special care *not to mention* that it was sabotage – just like you asked. The parts will be here soon...”

Virginia did not wait for the rest of the explanation.

“When this is over I’ll *personally* see to it that Corbett is *shot*! He must think that if he takes away our contact with the mainland, we’ll all fall apart – *being women*!”

“There are *other* men here too, Virginia,” Debra said coldly, agreeing in principle with her angry employer’s sentiment, though not making her point as clear as she might have liked. “We should consider that it *may not* have been Corbett, or that at the very least, Corbett may not have acted alone.”

Virginia glared, then nodded, displeased that her aide might question Corbett’s guilt, but happy with the concept that perhaps the recent problems had been the work of more than *just one* man. In any case, there seemed to be no dissuading the boss that this was a *man’s* doing.

“*Men!*” she spat. “*We don’t need any of them to survive out here, Debra!*”

The comment was fired like a bullet, and almost as though it was aimed at Debra. The boss was angry, and yet it was unusual for her to snap at her trusted aide. Rarely had Debra seen the boss so incensed.

“Our women are as fit and capable as *anyone*,” barked Virginia. “*That’s* why we train them the way we do! *Damn that Corbett* – and damn *all men*! Men are *always* the cause of *all* our problems!”

Debra shot back a conciliatory comment, aware that her previous comment had not supported Virginia’s unsubstantiated condemnation of Jo Corbett.

“*I agree*,” she said hastily. “What I meant was that Jo Corbett may not have acted *alone*, and we should remember that. Besides, if Jo Corbett wants to play games with the women on the island, it doesn’t make a lot of sense for him to do it when he knows there are other men here *too*. I’m just trying to keep an open mind, Virginia. We’ll get him, don’t worry.”

Virginia Linford's smoldering anger eased just slightly as she considered what the golden girl was saying, but she was far from placated.

"Too right we will, Debra, but Corbett is just a replacement, remember? If he is out to threaten my girls, or to hold us all to ransom, then he won't ever get the chance. We'll make sure of that! We'll have to be careful. He just might try something *desperate*, while he has the chance." She thought again, rubbing her forehead.

"*Whatever* his motives, we find ourselves cut off in every way from the mainland until that plane arrives." She fell silent again, thinking, and then her face stiffened as before. When she next spoke to Debra, she was trying to compose herself. It did not please her to be so obviously rattled.

"You must tell *no one* of this for the moment, Debra," she said quietly. "For the time being, *no one needs to know*. We'll start by finding Corbett, and then we'll grill him! We'll find out why he took the radios, and we'll make another call to the mainland. And then I'm going to have his guts!" She struggled to suppress another rising swell of anger, grappling for control, then added begrudgingly, "I suppose that means you'll have to tell that incompetent young imbecile *King* about this! Tell *him* to go look for Corbett!"

"I'll tell him right away, Virginia. He's still out patrolling, but I'll see he doesn't rest until Corbett is found." Debra hesitated, then offered her own services. "Would you like me to help with the search?"

Virginia's sullen mood and obvious agitation suddenly dissolved, replaced by a softer and genuine concern for her golden-haired girl.

"*No, Debra*. By no means do I want you to do *that*." She held up a restraining finger to show her strenuous objection to the idea. "*No*. If Mister Corbett really *does* want to play nasty games with us, it's probably that he has an eye for our girls. I don't want you putting yourself in danger."

Debra sensed genuine concern. It was a rare experience, and an order she would not debate. Virginia's voice metamorphosed again into the more harsh, business-like one Debra knew so well, and the lack of concern for the younger of the two security men was unmistakable.

"Let *Mister King* find Corbett. After all, *that's* what I pay him for! And give him an incentive, Debra – tell him to get results or else I'll see to it that *he'll* never have children either!"



Jeff King watched as Kirsty Smart spread the small, red blanket on the soft grass. Even as she was completing the task, he began unclipping his utility belt from about his waist. He lowered it carefully toward one edge of the blanket, then allowed it to drop the rest of the way, about a hand span.

Kirsty turned to face him, her young face showing just how nervous she really was. A wide grin covered Jeff's face, and served only to demonstrate his insensitivity. He was busy taking in her youthful attractiveness.

"*Ooo-wee!*" he exclaimed. "This island has just *got to be* the greatest place *ever!*"

"It's a *prison*, Jeff," she argued, staring nervously at him. "I've been here for years and I can assure you it's nothing but a pain. No visitors – or when there are, they're all just so much *older* than me." Her nervousness retreated momentarily as she brushed away a few loose strands of blonde hair that obscured her view of the young man, and suddenly her face blossomed with a mischievous, albeit slightly guarded smile. "Until *you* arrived, that is."

She flicked her shoulder-length blonde hair as if to exhibit some form of control of the situation, but it was a transparent show of hollow bravado, and did not fool even a man as young as Jeff King. As soon as she had done it, her face retreated slightly, showing fear again. Jeff stepped up as though he might wrap his arms around her, but found her youthful nervousness contagious, and suddenly dared not touch her. He tilted his head as though he might kiss her, but again lacked the confidence required.

"Oh, come on Kirsty," he protested. "You were *keen enough* to come up here with me. Are you gonna go all shy on me now?"

It was true. Kirsty had been keen to escape the prying eyes of others, and to retreat to this secluded place with the handsome Jeff King. But having arrived, her desire to escape was quickly being replaced by a range of fears that were creating a barrier through which even brazen youth could not easily break.

"You're really pretty," he said, not knowing what else to say.

It was an attempt to reassure her, but in his impetuous haste he only added to Kirsty's apprehension. In a twist of irony, she suddenly realized that despite the image she had concocted of Jeff King as the young, impressive, decisive and mature security man, he was in fact, only a little older and certainly no more confident than she. Until that moment she had reasoned that it was only *she* who was nervous.

Their visual embrace broke with an uneasy shuffle from both. They struggled with where to

go next. She was just seventeen, three years his junior, and quite pretty, with just a few traces of acne. She had been friendly to him from their very first meeting, and just as he had expected, she had eagerly accepted his invitation to explore the island with him. Of course, in Jeff's mind, there was more to explore than just the island...

Much more.

But now, alone and together for the first time, she had become remarkably nervous, and he did not know how to proceed. Added to that, he had missed breakfast, grabbing at the only available food he could find that morning – a generous and varied array of fruit. Having gulped the tropical delights, and now with a sizeable case of his own nerves, his stomach was beginning to protest, even audibly.

"The only one who's a prisoner here is me," he finally offered, feeling very short of something mature to say. "I'm *your* prisoner." It was woeful and they both knew it, and he regretted it the moment it was out. But to his enormous relief Kirsty suddenly burst out laughing.

"That's gotta be the *corniest thing* I've ever heard!" she pronounced loudly, unable to hide her enjoyment. Then, as her wide grin ebbed away, she added more appreciatively, "But it was nice."

They both smirked at how lame he felt, but he could see that the statement had somewhat buoyed Kirsty's flagging nerves. Just then his stomach growled noisily, an audible and embarrassing complaint even over the dull roar of the ocean and the wind. The unwanted noise served two purposes. It further broke the tension, causing both to snicker, and moreover, it proved to Jeff that he would not be able to even *hope* for satisfaction of one animal urge, until he had fulfilled another, far more pressing one.

"I gotta take a walk," he confessed, and she could read the disappointment on his face as he patted his stomach with one hand. "I ate too much fruit this morning, and..."

"Please," she demanded playfully, holding up a restraining hand, "*don't explain* any more than you have to."

A second rumble punctuated his need, and Kirsty simply nodded that she was happy for him to go. In truth, suffering second thoughts about having flirted and come this far alone with Jeff, she was only *too happy* for him to give her a couple of minutes to think.

"I won't be long," he promised, and then in a move which he realized too late could only help to scuttle his lusty aspirations, he added immaturely, "Linford will spew if we're late back. Corbett was missing this morning and she was in a stinking mood."

Incentive for speed it may have been, but after he spoke the words he realized that they were somewhat less than romantic. He had blundered yet again. Since he could think of no way to recover from such a slip, he simply smiled weakly and added, "Back in a few minutes."

She nodded, a huge knot bound up in her stomach.

The sounds of his trudging feet upon the grass were immediately drowned out by the dull roar of the ocean pounding against the nearby rocky cliff face, and the gentle wail of constant wind. With Jeff gone, Kirsty did not feel any less horrible. Hormones had led her to this point, but now she was terrified. Adding weight to all of her fears, there was the sure knowledge that her mother, *the prized cook of Valkyrie*, Virginia Linford's trusted friend from old, would also be angry if she was late back. She wondered if coming here with Jeff King had been an entirely well conceived notion.

Kirsty turned to face the ocean and the cliff edge some ten meters away. Just on the chance that Jeff was peeking from the bushes, she did not wish to face him. Her stomach churned. She had led him on so much... *Surely* if she backed out now, he would not understand. Her face contorted as she stood motionless, facing the roaring cliff edge. Her mind raced, and her stomach kept time. *What could she do?* She was more frightened than ever. Oh well, Jeff had been so nice to her, and she trusted him. He would understand... *she hoped.*

She glanced down and noticed that Jeff had left his utility belt, complete with radio and holstered automatic. *Anything*, she thought – anything to buy her a moment away from the fears she was facing. She stooped to pick up the heavy leather belt and the equipment attached to it. She withdrew the clean, shining automatic, and marveled at the cold, heavy weapon.

Kirsty's nerves caused her to shudder as she suddenly sensed Jeff's premature return behind her. Terrified as she already was concerning Jeff's unspoken sexual expectations, and then being caught playing with his automatic caused her to gasp with fright and swallow hard. She hoped desperately that he would not be angry with her, and she dared not to turn and face him. Instead of apologizing, however, she attempted to defuse any possible reaction with a little more light-hearted banter.

She spoke without ever turning to face him. "You're not supposed to be back yet," she warned, "I'm armed, you know."

She smiled, and her nerves eased as his left arm slipped softly around her left shoulder, his khaki-covered forearm slipping under her chin. She could tell by the calmness of his movements that he was not angry with her, and she was greatly relieved. Still smiling, she holstered the pistol

again, well aware of her lack of firearms expertise, and that she did not want to drop the weapon or cause it to discharge, turning her joke into something far more serious.

In an instant her smile disappeared.

There came first a single small popping sound behind her, and Kirsty let out an exhaled grunt. Her eyes widened as a searing pain emanated from the small of her back and spread throughout her belly, culminating in an agonizing pain in front. It was like nothing she had ever known, sudden and indescribably cruel.

The holstered pistol and belt slipped from her fingertips and fell with a thud to the blanket in front of her. She wanted to struggle, but did not want to exacerbate the burning pain within her belly, so she strove to stand as still as she could, shaking on faltering legs. Her spine arched backwards as her left hand came up and gripped the khaki arm beneath her chin, and all the while she gasped small, rapid breaths, struggling for control of the unknown pain, which was *so great* that she could not scream.

Kirsty tried to talk, but she couldn't do that either.

"*J-Jeff-J-*," she spluttered, but it was all the sound she could make.

Her mind reeled, as amid burning pain and rising panic, she knew that she must try to convey her ordeal to him. She could not understand the source of her awful pain, and moreover, why Jeff would be standing so still behind her, apparently unaware of her trauma. She placed her right hand flat on her stomach, and a deep and new wrenching horror chilled her as she felt wetness there. She lowered her eyes, trying to see the source of the warm, oily wetness. To her horror, when she withdrew her small hand and held it up, her fingers spread wide and dripped with smeared blood. Terrified, she impulsively replaced the hand in a moment.

Surely Jeff must know, she thought frantically. *Surely!* Just for a moment, a sickening and terrifying thought struck her – perhaps Jeff *did know!* Perhaps Jeff *was the source!* No, she thought. *It couldn't be!*

But the traumatic deliberations had barely begun in her reeling mind before another *pop* heralded another agonizing burst of cruel and stupefying pain, centrally just below her rib cage. Again her white blouse danced and tore, and again a red spatter issued from her body, this time just above her flattened hand.

Kirsty grunted again, then crumpled.

She grunted as yet another *pop* caused the clean white cloth over her right breast to spit another small fountain of blood, and she burned again with another cruel agony. She felt something

slice mercilessly through her, and wondered at the small, ugly hole torn in her neat white blouse, yet so intense was the pain that still she could not scream.

Kirsty let go a series of high-pitched gasps, trying desperately and unsuccessfully to protest verbally. She viewed the latest destruction in horrified shock, her eyes wide with disbelief as she watched her blood spit in stark, deep red spurts from the eruptions of fabric and torn flesh. Her head thrust back, her mouth open wide as a muffled and shrill cry finally emanated from deep within her throat.

Kirsty's mind reeled and raced, but there was no avenue of escape. When finally her breath returned sufficiently for her to speak, her words were intense, but not loud due to the destruction of one lung.

"J-Jeff!" she wheezed, *"Jeff. No!"*

Her mind wrestled and she could not understand why he would do such a thing to her. Even in her stupefied state, Kirsty knew intuitively that she was being toyed with. *He's killing me, killing me slowly*, she thought. *He's having fun with me!* The realization made her body burn with magnified agony, and her mind grapple with deathly anguish.

The questions echoed in her mind until she was struck again.

No, Jeff, no! she pleaded, the words echoing silently in the tormented cavern of her mind.

But she felt him do it. *She felt him take her life...*

Kirsty felt the cruel, familiar pain again, hot and searing, this time near the center of her back and in the left side of her chest. The bullet punched between ribs, just left of her spine, spearing through her left lung and exploding from her breast in an instant. This time she barely made a sound, her back arching away automatically as she sought to escape the source of the pain. She witnessed the familiar spray of red matter, stark upon her clean, white blouse.

Kirsty whimpered softly, then sagged, a bloody gurgle emanating from within her traumatized chest. She ceased to struggle against her attacker almost immediately, her flailing arms falling suddenly to her sides as she received the mortal wound. With her life ebbing away, she was finally allowed to slump to the blanket. Kirsty lay still, her body twisted and her eyes half open as her vision failed. And while her body had ceased to fight, her dying thoughts were of Jeff King, and a deep sense of betrayal that she could not understand.

Just seconds later her bleeding body was falling lifelessly to the raging surf forty meters below.



When Jeff King returned a short while later, he was oblivious to the sudden and cruel fate of his young friend. He stepped near to where the blanket had been, and could not believe that it was gone. Worse still, Kirsty was not there either.

At first he was shocked that she would leave him without a word. Sure, she had been nervous. He knew that. But surely she was not *that* frightened. He wandered about the clearing, calling her name and hoping fervently that he might see her. Perhaps she had sought a more private place? But surely she would have waited for him to return? He quickly became concerned. Hurriedly glancing about him, he moved toward the cliff face, suddenly frightened by its hungry roar.

What if she had fallen? What if...?

It made no sense. And then he remembered his utility belt, and moreover, his automatic. He spun to search for it.

Some distance away from where the blanket had been, he then saw the empty leather holster, and suddenly a nervous apprehension twisted the features of his face. He froze, grinned hopefully, then slowly looked about him. It would be just like Kirsty to jump out, waving the pistol as a joke. He barely knew her, but he'd seen enough to know that she just might do such a foolish thing. His voice quickly betrayed his fears.

"Come out, Kirsty! Don't play with that thing!" He became more intense in the absence of an answer. "Kirsty, *come on!* This is *not* a good idea. Girl, am I ever going to *spank you!* Get your cute little behind out here now and give me back my gun. You don't even know how to use it."

"I do."

Jeff King jumped.

The voice that rasped behind him was barely audible over the dull roar of the ocean, but it was enough to send him spinning and stumbling backwards with fright. His heart pounded in his ears as he faced the unexpected trespasser, who strolled casually toward him from the bushes. The intruder wore a ski mask, loose fitting khaki fatigues and matching hiking boots, along with a heavily laden utility belt. Moreover, Jeff suddenly realized that he was staring into the barrel of his own weapon.

The hand that held it did not waver, and beyond the steady hand, a hooded face glared at him,

piercing eyes studying him through the small holes of the ski mask.

The scene was surreal to Jeff, and he took several backward paces with his hands raised in a gesture of peace before his mind began to take in the reality of the situation. After many long seconds of backing up, he suddenly realized that the stranger also carried the red blanket that Kirsty had brought with her. Sensing mortal danger, his eyes fell instinctively to it, then widened with overpowering terror as he realized that it was wet with a sticky, red stain.

Fear of being caught having forbidden liaisons with Kirsty Smart gave way immediately to a far greater fear, and one which he quickly aired.

“*Where’s Kirsty?*” he demanded. “*Where is she?*” There was a frantic shrillness in his voice. He understood the waving of the barrel to mean that the intruder wanted him to step backwards, and at first he complied, drawing to within just four meters of the cliff edge.

“*Where is she?*” he demanded again, an even more intense and shrill tone in his voice. Then he called out, hoping that Kirsty might answer. “*Kirsty! Kirsty! Where are you?*” When Kirsty did not answer, he faced the stranger again and repeated his demand.

“What have you done with her? *Where is she?*” Now his voice was showing clear signs of panic, his mind not wanting to consider that Kirsty might have been harmed. Any moment she would come out of the bushes, laughing, he hoped frantically, and then he would have to admit to having been taken in by one of her jokes.

He hoped. But he knew it was not true.

The intruder’s eyes moved momentarily to the sticky blanket, then back to Jeff as the blanket was then draped over the pistol, obscuring it from view. Then, speaking with a low, grating voice, the visitor took pleasure in telling Jeff the news about his missing love.

“Kirsty’s gone for a swim. She can’t hear you.”

Jeff’s eyes widened as the words crushed him, and his forehead became lined with anguish. Then a lone, muffled crack and a puff of red material confirmed for Jeff that Kirsty surely *had* been harmed. A small portion of his left thigh exploded and he fell heavily to the ground, gripping the wound with both hands and crying out in pain even before he reached the soft grass. His face contorted with shock and pain.

“*Aggh! What the hell are you doing?*” His voice was shaking as he clutched his bleeding thigh. Rather than speak, Kirsty’s killer chose to answer the young security man with his own weapon, still using the blanket as a crude silencer.

The khaki on Jeff’s other thigh exploded with another liberal spray of blood, and his hands

suddenly had to stem the tide of blood from two agonizing wounds. He rolled about on the grass, screaming, his mind reeling. Almost like an order for quiet, the pistol barked again, and this time it was Jeff's right hand that bore the brunt. The bullet tore through bone and flesh, instantly paralyzing the hand, and traveling through into his injured left thigh, tearing it further.

Jeff rolled away and let out another painful howl. Then anger began to rise up within him, and he rolled back to face his tormentor, tears beginning to stream down his face.

"What did you do with *Kirsty*?" This time his voice was loud and shrill. "*You animal! Where is she?*"

His angry demand was met by silence and a complacent stare. Then his attacker withdrew his pistol from beneath the blanket and dropped the artificial silencer to the ground. Knowing that Jeff was mostly incapacitated, the stranger stepped closer and whispered in a low, husky voice.

"*Did you have fun with her?*"

Jeff was stunned and battling with pain and shock, yet he answered the question as honestly as he could, hoping fervently that somehow an honest answer might end this madness, and Kirsty might suddenly appear.

"*No,*" he sobbed. "I like her a lot, but I didn't... *touch her*. Please tell me where she is."

Jeff's heart sank as the intruder's free hand moved to withdraw a silenced pistol from a shoulder holster, hidden within the khaki jacket. His face contorted in anguish as he realized the worst, and through a wall of tears he made a hopeless request.

"Where is she? *Please, where is she?*" He feared he already knew.

Again the barrel of his own weapon waved, and the truth smashed with more devastating effect in his brain than all the bullets had done to his body. The motioning of the weapon was silently pointing to the cliff edge, and Jeff closed his eyes as his world dissolved in tears.

Unwilling to wait for Jeff's attention, Kirsty's killer returned the silenced automatic to its hiding place and then retrieved the blanket again. Covering the pistol as before to muffle its sound, Jeff's attacker then shot him once more in his right thigh. Jeff's eyes opened again and his angry, distorted face shot a look of hatred at his tormentor, but he did not speak as he gripped at this latest wound, making a futile effort to comfort the shattered bone within.

"*She's... shark... bait!*" grated the simple, but heartless whisper, spoken slowly for maximum torturous effect. Then the terrifying completion. "And now, it's time for *you* to join her." The killer motioned for Jeff to jump voluntarily to his death

But he would not. Instead, Jeff rubbed the tears from his eyes and stared through a wall of

pain and disbelief into his attacker's face.

"No," he said quietly.

Another dull crack sent yet another explosion of flesh into the air, this time from his previously uninjured left hand. The hand spurted blood and twisted in reaction to the pain and destruction.

"*I can't!*" he screamed. "*I can't!*" Now he was sobbing loudly, his voice shaking uncontrollably, and begging for mercy. "*P-please, don't. I c-can't! Please! Damn you! How can you d-do this?*"

His attacker drew nearer, and for many long seconds the two stared into each other's eyes, listening to the roar of the surf below, neither speaking. Then the intruder's head began to shake from side to side, and Jeff knew that it was a sign of disapproval. Up close, even through the small holes of the mask he could see the killer's hatred, an all-encompassing evil need for revenge, twisting and contorting the face of his attacker.

Without warning the automatic barked twice more, the bullets spearing through Jeff's chest. He slumped, and then seconds later felt the toe of a boot kicking at his shattered and bleeding chest. The bullets in his chest seemed almost to bring mercy, and after all he had endured, he barely noticed the boot kicking at him some more. He felt no pain from it.

Jeff's final sensation was that of falling, free, with the ocean wind momentarily tending to his wounds, easing his pain. He thought of Kirsty, *lovely Kirsty*. And then came a final, loud splashing crack.



CHAPTER 10

Anna Smart wiped down the stainless steel benchtop as Virginia spoke. It wasn't that she felt the need to remain working just because the boss was watching her; it was that she was conscientious. She *could not* stop until the kitchen was clean, and all the work was done. If anything made Anna nervous, it was not the threat of Virginia's expectations, but of failing to do her job well, and that meant keeping the kitchen clean as well as productive.

"You are probably my longest serving employee, you know, Anna," Virginia said.

Her voice was soft and filled with what the cook could only discern as genuine respect. Virginia's eyes were filled with a kindness not often seen by employees, the harsh business-like veneer stripped away. She toted a coat over one arm, and waited respectfully until the cook had completed wiping one of the benches before depositing it there.

"You may not run a company for me, Anna, but you have tended your work faithfully, and I have always known I could rely on you."

"Thank you, Virginia," Anna replied.

She looked her boss in the eyes as she said the words, wanting very much for Virginia to know that she meant it. Such a rare display from the *cast iron boss* could not pass without a sincere response, especially from someone so meek and faithful as Anna Smart. Then Anna's eyes were back to her work.

"Of all the people I have hired over the years, Anna," Virginia continued, "*you* are still my *only* true friend. I always wanted to make you more than just a cook, you know."

"But I didn't want to be anything else."

Anna corrected the boss as few others might dare. Virginia gave a faint smile and conceded the point. She knew there was no point in arguing. However, she would not desist from the thrust of her speech.

"You've also been the most loyal person I know. You've never made a demand of me, never let me down. I appreciate that. You know that if I could ever help anyone, it would be you."

Anna's eyes were again drawn to her boss, and she nodded, somewhat surprised by Virginia's overt words of encouragement and genuine caring. Thankful as she was, however, she immediately then took on her natural concern as a parent.

"There's only *one* thing I could ever ask, Virginia," replied Anna. "Kirsty may be young, and sometimes a little wayward, but she's my only child. I know – she should have come back to help me today. But like I said, she's *just young*. She's a good girl. If the need ever arises, the only favor I could ever ask is, would you please take care of her for me? She's all I've got. I just wouldn't ever like to see her – fall between the cracks, if you know what I mean."

Anna's eyes would not let the boss go until she had secured a nod of promise from Virginia, and then the cook smiled again, happy in the knowledge that Kirsty would always be cared for. It was a business deal, done and sealed in a brief, honorable moment.

"Like I said, Anna," Virginia answered, "you are really the *only true friend* in this world. So, for your sake, I will always make sure that both you and Kirsty are well taken care of. Enough

worrying.”

Again the small smile crossed her face. “But there’s something else, isn’t there, Anna? What is it?”

Anna Smart tilted her head apologetically, then turned up one corner of her mouth. “May I just ask one question? It’s none of my business, but I – just want to know.”

The cook waited for Virginia’s nod of approval, even though she knew full well that it would be forthcoming. Truly, theirs was a rare relationship, and one that the likes of Debra Birch would be jealous of, if she knew.

“Why are you so hard on these poor hopefuls who come here, Virginia? I mean, they try *so hard*, and they’re bright and diligent. Why be so hard on them? Aren’t you afraid that you’ll make them give up hope?”

Virginia Linford nodded. It was a question few would have dared to ask, and even fewer would have received a proper response to. Strangely, although she and Anna were around the same age and were indeed old friends, Anna had long been a maternal example and figure in Virginia’s life. The boss simply smiled, because to hear Anna showing concern for the welfare of others was typical. There came no resentment at having been asked the question, but only a truthful answer.

“I can’t go soft on them, Anna. I *have to* try to destroy them. You just told me that the most important thing in the world to you is Kirsty. *She’s your family*. Well, the company is *my* family. And *that* may not seem right to you, but it is nonetheless, true. When I entrust my companies to these people, I’m trusting them with my family – *my everything*.

“I’ve had no babies, Anna, so the company *is* my baby. I raised it from the dust, and it’s the only thing I’ll leave when I go.” Her voice grew deeply solemn. “So I *have to know* that it is in the safest hands possible – no matter *what the cost*. I’m not trying to *destroy* these people, Anna, I’m trying to ensure the survival of my only baby. And if there are a few casualties along the way, then that’s the price we must pay.”

Anna Smart’s face remained quizzical, happy enough with the response, but still prying silently for truth, as only a perceptive friend might. Virginia Linford, seeing that her only ally in the world would not desist, confessed the final, deepest truth.

“*And I’m dying*, Anna.”

The cook’s eyes widened, her face showing genuine shock and dread. But friend or not, it was a subject the boss did not wish to dwell on.

“Cancer,” she confessed. “It would seem that not only did I *not* have babies, Anna, but my

plumbing is now seeking revenge on me. I have only six months to live, maybe a year at best. Beauty on the outside, but dying an ugly death on the inside.”

Anna’s shocked response was out in a moment. “But you have money, Virginia. You must *fight this!* Have you gotten treatment?”

“It’s too late, Anna,” Virginia rebutted. Her tone was matter-of-fact, and so resigned that her mood was contagious. “They tell me there’s nothing they can do. All they *can* do is slash and burn. And I won’t have that. Carved up like a Christmas turkey, and all to gain what? A few extra months – *maybe?* And it’s a big maybe, Anna.”

She held up a restraining hand, and despite the cook’s genuine concern, Anna realized that Virginia had made her decision, and would no longer discuss it.

“I’m so sorry, Virginia,” Anna said bleakly. “If there’s anything I can do…”

“No, Anna,” Virginia answered softly. Then she smiled bravely, as if to convince Anna of her resolve. “It’s settled in my mind. What’s done is done. I’m just glad I have the time to set things in order before I go. That’s what *this* is all about, Anna – me setting things in order. I must find the most capable people to run my companies before I go. That’s all that matters now.”

There was an intimate silence between them, full of sadness and deep understanding.

“Well,” Anna finally responded, “I don’t agree with your unwillingness to fight, but I’ll support you in any way I can. You *know* that.”

“You already have,” came the reply. “You *always have.*” Virginia sighed. “I’m a fashion mogul, Anna. I won’t go out of this world bald and slashed, or less than the woman I was born. I’d rather die the way I am. That’s me. I’m sorry”

They shared a few more minutes of quiet, emotional sadness over the news before Virginia swore Anna to secrecy, then returned the subject to Kirsty.

“Enough of the worrying,” the boss insisted.

Her face blossomed into a broad and caring smile, the likes of which few people knew existed. “I promise you this *one thing*, Anna: I will see to it that you will never need to worry about Kirsty. You have *my word on it*. We were *all* young once, and I understand the ways of youth. I promise I will never leave you to worry about your little girl.”

Anna’s face reacted in kind, bursting forth with a warm and thankful smile. Her small wrinkles became deeper with the smile, and a weight lifted from her. She leaned forward and hugged her boss in a spontaneous display of gratitude, tears gathering in her eyes and beginning to roll down her cheeks at both Virginia’s promise, and the sad news she bore.

Virginia returned the hug, something no other employee would ever receive. The hug was then broken abruptly by Virginia as she heard the boisterous arrival of Peter and Linda, who laughed loudly, joking with each other as they blundered in through the double doors at the far end of the canteen. Anna allowed her boss to escape, knowing very well that such a caring pose was something Virginia would not want witnessed by *mere candidates* – or possibly anyone, for that matter. Virginia withdrew, her face taking on the familiar, hardened look the candidates were accustomed to.

The two visitors were loud, laughing as they continued to stride through the canteen toward the kitchen. When they saw that Virginia was present their laughter dissipated, and the two became almost subdued. Apart from courteous greetings the two spoke little to Virginia, though Anna forced them to make small talk as they began rummaging about in an effort to make coffee. Virginia waited until the visitors were safely engrossed in their coffee making, then whispered to Anna.

“Just don’t tell anyone I show you special attention. I have a reputation to uphold. I’m the *megabitch*, remember?”

Anna smiled widely and nodded her understanding. A moment later Virginia was ready to leave, happy that things with her only true friend in the world were well.

“Now I must go, Anna,” she said. As she strolled along the hallway to the kitchen exit, she said, “It’s windy out, and I think maybe getting a little colder. Unseasonable, I think. Might be a change in the weather coming.”

As if to punctuate the prediction, she retrieved the heavy coat she had bought with her. “Might not need this yet,” she said, “but I think maybe soon.” She draped the coat over one arm. “Good night, Anna,” she said.

“Good night, Virginia,” came the quiet and humble reply, and Virginia Linford continued on her way down the short hallway and out through the rear door into the windy darkness beyond.

The two visitors, with freshly made coffees in hand, resumed their noisy joking. They exchanged pleasantries with Anna again, then left only a minute later through the double doors they had entered by, at the far end of the canteen.

Anna smiled at the candidates’ nervous disposition towards Virginia. She continued wiping the benches, the last of her duties before retiring for a well-earned rest. Kirsty’s absence had left her and Meagan with extra work, and she was now tired and eager to put her feet up. She wondered where Kirsty could be. It was not the first time her daughter had not fronted for duties, and the arrival of that new security man, Jeff King made Anna particularly apprehensive.

His presence might well prove very destructive for Kirsty, and Anna could not help but fret.

After all, the girl was only seventeen years old, and knew little of the world. Anna mulled it over in her mind. Dangers would always be present for her daughter, especially having spent so many of her formative years growing up on Valkyrie. She determined to speak with Kirsty soon, and try to explain the need for caution. Then she sighed thankfully.

At least the boss was on her side.

Anna switched off the kitchen lights, leaving just small security lights to show the way. She turned, the sponge still in her hand, and was met by a person standing just behind her. Her face showed little surprise, and no fear. In typical style, she smiled warmly.

“Oh, it’s *you*,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

The visitor wore a large, loose fitting dark coat with the hood pulled up, and leaned forward to Anna as though to hug her. The cook did not expect the move, and was somewhat taken by surprise, but not wishing to appear ignorant, automatically opened her arms to return the gesture. As the visitor’s left arm encircled Anna’s shoulders, embracing the amiable cook, Anna grunted and flinched. Her small smile gave way to a long, wheezing inhalation, and then her mouth fell wide open, then closed and opened like a fish removed from water, though little sound came forth.

Anna’s eyes widened and her head tilted back as she was overcome with stifling pain.

The two embraced in the semi-darkness of the silent kitchen, Anna’s wide eyes staring over the visitor’s left shoulder to the ceiling, her face grimacing and her body shivering. The visitor’s face was close to Anna’s, and whispered gently into her ear. Their embrace lasted almost a full minute, the two of them locked together as though in silent, mortal combat. And so it *was* a battle, but one which was decided even before the struggle began.

The visitor’s right arm made occasional small movements that made Anna’s face contort repeatedly, and caused her to let out several more wheezing gasps. Finally, when the near-silent struggle was over, the visitor placed both arms about the cook, and simply held her steady and upright against the stainless steel bench, as though in a loving embrace. Anna shivered and made occasional small sounds, but in another half minute she was entirely silent and still.

Their embrace then eased, and the visitor’s right hand came up and gently closed Anna’s shocked, staring eyes.

As the person stepped back, helping Anna to ease slowly to the floor, the handle of one of the cook’s own large carving knives was clearly visible, protruding from beneath her rib cage. The large, wide blade was aimed up into the cook’s chest, and was buried to the handle. Blood was beginning to ooze from the single entry wound, and Anna’s white uniform was now marked with a

sticky, dark red stain that grew larger by the second.



John Stone stood on the beach with Katrina. His stomach was tense with nerves, and he could not bring himself to tell her what he knew he should. He listened mostly, and the two made small talk, but neither could breach the awkward barrier that had been placed between them.

“Moon’s nearly full,” Katrina said, a brisk, unseasonably cool wind sending a shiver through her already trembling body.

“Yeah,” he agreed weakly. “Wind’s picked up too.”

He regretted that they were reduced to making senseless, meaningless statements. But she was right. The moon was almost full, and was lighting up the landscape brilliantly. As he stared into her face, her brown eyes sparkled with life and love, and he melted again. After many long awkward seconds, it was Katrina who finally broached the subject.

“I can’t hide from it anymore, John,” she said quietly. “I love you, and now we both know it. I’ve felt this way for *so* long, and just never told you. But we can’t go on like this. At least, *I can’t.*”

He looked at her, knowing her pain, but was still unsure of his own feelings. Then she surprised him with her bravery, intelligence and selflessness.

“If I can’t have you, then so be it,” she said honestly. She stared out to sea, then spoke words that made his heart break. “*It’s the boat captain, isn’t it?*”

Her eyes searched him, and he knew she deserved the truth.

“Yes,” he replied. “Well, I think... Look, I *just don’t know.*” It was the best he could do, and besides, at that moment it was the truth.

“What do you mean?” she asked, desperate to understand him.

“I mean I’m not sure, Katie.” He stared into her sparkling eyes as he said the words. “I *do* love you. You *know that.* I always have. *We* always have. But I’ve just been taken by surprise. And I’m not going to use *you or anyone else* until I know myself a little better. I just can’t *use you*, that’s all. I’m not *using* her either, if that helps.”

Katrina swallowed and tried to hide her pain. Small as the consolation was, though, it *did* help.

At that moment their conversation was interrupted by a third nightwalker. Penny White’s petite figure was easily recognizable in the moonlight, and she made no effort to veer away from

them as she strolled along the beach. Her path brought her right to them, and she stopped to speak.

“You two are out late,” she said.

Her tiny frame and quiet voice gave little indication of her potential for ruthless aggression and the power she had to intimidate, but her inference was abundantly clear. She did not approve of them being alone on the beach together.

“You should be getting your sleep. Another hard day tomorrow, you know.”

“We were just about to go,” replied Katrina, unwilling to jeopardize either her own position, or Stone’s. “Just enjoying a lovely night, that’s all.”

She cast her eyes out to sea to punctuate her statement, and Penny’s eyes followed. Both Stone and Katrina remained sitting in the sand, and he stared up at his business teacher, wondering at such a study in contradiction. Penny had showered and was now dressed informally, wearing blue jeans that hung from her hips, a white bikini top and a pale cut-off blouse which she had not buttoned.

He could see her slim form in the moonlight, and thought how attractive she could be if she would just lose the *carnivorous* attitude. She was small and pretty, and her short, dark hair, while not as attractive to him as Katrina’s, was certainly stylish. Her glasses sparkled with reflected light, as did her white teeth, and Stone was disappointed that such a petite, pleasant looking woman could be so quiet and pleasant one moment, and tearing at the jugular the next.

Penny hugged herself with folded arms.

“Getting cool,” she noted. Her *tone was too*. “Don’t stay out *too late*, will you.” The comment reeked of threat, and annoyed both candidates to the core. It brought an inevitable retort from Stone.

“I believe this time is our own, Penny,” he said firmly.

The young woman showed no reaction to his overt rebuke, but he had little doubt that she would exact revenge for it the following day. Still, it *deserved* a response. Penny’s presence, and the overt threat were too much for Katrina, too, and she began to rise.

“Penny’s right, John,” she said abruptly. There was harshness in her tone. “We should be going.”

He rose too, and Penny, happy that she had interrupted their liaison, ventured off to continue wandering along the beach. Katrina waited until Penny’s small form had moved silently away in the moonlight before speaking.

“*That woman needs sex*,” she said with stark disdain, shaking her head. “How old *are* we

anyway? And what's more – this time *is our own*. You were quite right, John.”

Stone grinned at her reaction to Penny's obvious chastising of their presence alone on the beach.

“They don't know what *fraternizing* is!” Katrina continued to blurt. Just for a moment an impulse drove her to want to kiss him hard to prove her point, but she pushed it down. “Sometimes,” she added stiffly, “I'd just like to beat that woman senseless!” Then she calmed again as Stone continued to stare at her, investigating her reaction to Penny. But she could not resist adding a parting shot in the direction of the receding teacher. “Course, I might have to do it when no one else is watching.”

“That'd be best,” he agreed with a small, sly grin.

She took his hands in her own, laughed off her comment, and then a more serious expression passed over her face.

“John,” she said, “the trouble is that *Penny's right*. I don't want to get *either* of us into trouble, and being out here together *has* to look bad. We'd better go. But I want you to know something, and it hurts me more than you can know to tell you.”

He studied her face, listening intently.

“I *do* love you, John,” she promised. “But I won't stand in your way. As much as I hate to say it, and I know it sounds corny – it's true – in the end, I just want the best for you. And if you want to go after the stupid boat captain, then go and get her.” Katrina said the words as a gesture of sad acceptance of defeat, yet without malice. Her tears glistened in the moonlight as they rolled down her cheeks. “Just don't let Linford know that you're after her, or you'll be out of here. It's bad enough that Penny White saw us here, but don't let Linford catch you. *Okay!*”

Stone rubbed away her tears with his fingers. She was soft and lovely, and his heart tore within him. She was smart too.

“*You knew*,” he said. “You knew it was her.”

She nodded and attempted a brave smile that disappeared again at his next words.

“I'm not even sure I *want* to stay on the island anymore, Katie.”

Katrina was devastated, realizing from the depth of his tone that she might lose him sooner than even she had imagined. Not only might he choose *Mary* over her, but he might not even remain on the island for the duration of the course. She wondered how much longer she would see him, and moreover, how she could continue with Linford's course if he went. Her stomach ached with an emptiness she had not known since the death of her beloved sister. She swallowed, forcing the

words to come.

“Go after her if you love her, John. *Go and get her.*”

Then she pecked him on one cheek and wiped tears away from her eyes as she left. That left John Stone standing on the beach alone, and deeply, deeply troubled.



Penny White lifted up her face in the moonlight, struggling for breath. Her stomach ached, and she could barely breathe, let alone struggle against the person who was now busily binding her hands behind her back. She heard the sound of tape being dispensed from a roll, and felt its stickiness as it was wound repeatedly around her wrists. All the while she strove to regain her breath, her attacker's punch having completely disabled her.

Still unable to breathe properly, she then found herself being bundled along, held by one arm and forced to walk away from the water toward the line of trees that marked the edge of the sealed road. Once there she was thrown down hard, her body jarring heavily on the short grass. With her hands secured tightly behind her back she was unable to break her fall, and she grunted with pain at this latest blow. When Penny could finally speak, she was frightened, but also very angry.

“*Who the hell are you? What do you think you're doing?*” she yelled.

Her cries were bitter and unrestrained, but with the stiffening onshore wind, she knew no one at the main camp would hear her. Her attacker wore dark clothes and a black ski mask, and paid no heed to her irate words, but remained working some distance away with what Penny could clearly see was a coil of rope. She continued her angry discourse, her words spitting out like venom, desperately hoping that her tirade might frighten the stranger.

“*Don't you know who I am?*”

She fell momentarily silent when she realized what the rope really was. As her attacker lifted the coil in the moonlight, Penny could clearly see that one end had been prepared in a hangman's noose.

“Wait a minute!” she insisted, suddenly quite terrified.

She swallowed hard, panic sending an icy rush through her veins. The stranger did not answer, but threw the coiled rope high into the air over her head. Penny gasped and followed its trajectory in the moonlight, then cried aloud with fear as the rope crossed a bough and then tumbled back down, unfurling as it went. Only when the noose was swaying in the moonlight close to

Penny's face did the stranger speak a single order, in a voice that was whispered, harsh and raspy.

"Quiet!"

Penny did not heed the command, but screamed as her assailant attempted to place the noose over her head. She grimaced again in pain a moment later as a fist knocked the wind out of her for a second time. Like the first punch on the beach, it was hard, and was easily sufficient to disable her for a time. Before she could resist further, Penny felt the rough fibers of the rope itching at her throat, and felt the noose slipping, doing exactly what it was designed to do – tightening. It became immediately restricting, itching her and enclosing around the soft skin of her throat.

And then it was still.

She sat on her buttocks, her legs in front of her, and began flicking her head, trying to shake loose the rope, but it was already quite firm about her neck, and would not be cast off. Then she wrestled against the tape, but her wrists were held firm, and she knew that she could never break it. An eerie silence followed as she sat on the grass, glad not to be being hit and finally able to catch her breath. Her eyes followed the masked figure standing just two meters away, and again she sought to free herself with a verbal threat.

"Do you have any idea who I am?"

The tone in her voice might have made her students cringe, but the stranger was unaffected, and responded only by taking up the slack in the rope, pulling Penny's head upright as the rope fibers rasped a little harder about her neck. The stranger's left hand kept the rope taut while the right hand took a long bladed knife from a leather pouch on one hip. Penny suddenly gasped, more frightened than ever. In the pale moonlight she could see its long, shining blade, clean and honed and quite terrifying. She began to pant and cringe, her tough facade melting away. She tried to lean away as the stranger neared.

"Please don't hurt me," she suddenly pleaded. *"Please!"*

"Shhh!"

It was only the second time she had heard any sound come from the masked face, and the sound was very much an order. On this occasion Penny obeyed dutifully, shivering and gasping with fear, afraid for her life. When the voice spoke again, it was gravelly, almost whispering into her ear as the rope kept her upright and close.

"Yes, Penny. I know very well who you are. That's why you're here."

Penny's eyes widened. The gruff voice was eerie enough, rasping and threatening as it was, but the fact that this person knew her name, and had clearly waited specially for her to patrol the

beach was even more frightening. She knew she was in great peril, and so did the only thing she could think of. In an effort to build up some kind of rapport with the demented individual, she tried communicating, beginning by seeking the stranger's name.

"Who are you? *Please?* Tell me your name. At least let me see who hates me so much."

She shivered as she spoke, forcing the words out. Again the stranger did not answer her, but moved to her feet and secured her ankles with what she could now see was a roll of silver tape. She struggled against the move, but was overcome easily as the rope around her neck tugged and cut into her. In another moment the dark figure was standing beside her.

"Get on your knees," the stranger ordered brusquely.

Penny wanted to resist, but another rough tug on the rope left her with no choice. She struggled until she was able to comply, kneeling as she then turned her head to see the stranger move behind her to tape her tethered ankles to an exposed tree root, effectively anchoring her to the ground. She shivered as her attacker then knelt with her, tucked the tail end of the hangman's rope under one knee to maintain tightness, and stabbed the long knife into the grass.

While Penny was still shivering with fear and wondering what to say next, her attacker suddenly knelt before her, close, studying her. The stranger did not touch her, but took in the sight of her open blouse and her white bikini top. Her mouth fell open in shock and her face twisted at the prospect of what might happen next.

She suddenly regretted having been so overtly spiteful toward her students, and even more, that she had taken such a dangerous stroll on the beach. She had taken the same stroll every night – a mixture of pleasure and an opportunity to check on the behavior of wandering candidates. And always her moonlight walks had gone without incident. She cursed silently that she had not remained in her room *this* night. It seemed that her nightly habit and her cruel tongue were going to make her pay an awful price. She felt vulnerable and helpless, and yet, bound as she was, the harsh business-like manner she had come to personify was quick to surface.

"You're going to rape me, aren't you?" she demanded.

For the first time the stranger seemed to actually take notice of something she said. The dark figure stopped, the head tilted for a time, and then in the moonlight Penny could see thick lips smiling within the mask's mouth-hole.

"Don't flatter yourself, Penny," came the coarse, mechanical, grating reply.

A negative shake of the stranger's head showed that the fiend was simply enjoying these events, and that Penny's virtue might possibly remain intact. That knowledge, along with a cessation

in proceedings gave Penny reason for hope. Oddly enough, the stranger seemed satisfied with things as they were, and seemed in no hurry to proceed. Penny shivered with a mix of stifling fear and subdued, cautious anger. Perhaps this was nothing more than *retribution* – a brutal prank designed to teach her a lesson, or perhaps deliver a warning. Her mind took to wondering what the silent delay might mean. *Whatever it was*, she decided that it had to be a *good sign*.

It wasn't.

The stranger leaned close and stared silently into Penny's elfin face so that the two could see each other's eyes in the moonlight. Penny tried to compose herself, and with all the strength she could muster, she made her demands.

"If you're going to rape me, get on with it, then let me go. If you're not, then just let me go. Clearly, you've made your point. I can see now that you're angry about how I've treated you. Is that you, Tanner? Stone? Mister *Corbet*? Look, *just let me go, okay?*"

"No, Penny. You're *mine*."

The reply was little more than a hoarse whisper, and once spoken the stranger glanced about to check that they were still alone, then slowly lifted the front of the ski mask just enough to reveal its wearer. Penny's face contorted as she recognized her attacker. Her mouth sagged open in disbelief, and her head shook from side to side. A moment later, the mask was drawn down once more, and Penny was staring again into the cold wells of callous sadism that were the stranger's eyes.

"*You*," she said softly, "*but you...*" Her mind wrestled for a moment, as she began to realize the depth of her dilemma. She was, however, given no further opportunity to question. The figure leaned close and whispered again.

"This is not about *rape*, Penny," the voice rasped coldly. "It's about *fear*. I'm going to teach the people on this island to *truly fear!*" There came a cruel, sadistic grin. "And as for rape, I'm not even going to *touch* your clothes. I don't *need to*."

Before Penny could react, she felt the rope cutting into her throat again as the noose began to hoist her upright. With her feet now anchored to the exposed tree root, she was heaved upwards until her body was stretched out straight, though not quite vertical. The hangman's noose was not directly above the place where her feet had been tied, and so Penny was stretched at a slight angle above the earth. Unable to bring her tethered feet beneath her, Penny gagged, the rope chafing her throat and making it difficult for her to breathe, though not enough to choke her.

Her attacker tied off the rope near Penny's ankles and then moved around in front of her,

holding her taped right arm with one hand so as to steady her and to prevent her from spinning on to her back. Penny gasped, both for breath, and as a reaction to the pain of the rope that rasped against her throat. Surprisingly, though, she found that if she could suppress the panic in her brain, she could still breathe quite effectively. In a moment of desperate terror, she hoped that she might be able to pretend to choke to death, and then escape later.

It was a vain hope.

The figure looked into her eyes as she hung there, stretched and suspended not quite vertical over the soft grass. Their faces almost touched as the rough voice whispered again.

“You should appreciate this, Penny. You – *the teacher*. You should appreciate the time and effort I spent preparing for our little meeting. You should appreciate that this is all about *teaching by fear*, Penny. You understand *that*. You use it all the time.”

Penny struggled for breath, unable to fight, and then all hope and composure melted within her as she heard the next words.

“You’re the teacher, Penny,” the voice whispered again, its owner retrieving the long, shining knife from the grass, and wiping it clean on Penny’s sleeve, polishing it until it glistened brilliantly. “You like to teach. Well, this time you’ll be teaching by example – teaching them *fear*. This time you’re going to *be the lesson*, Penny.”

“*Nooo!*”

Penny protested through her choking throat, but the fiend was merciless and undaunted. She writhed and strained and resisted as best she could, but the stranger held her close, ignoring her twisting movements. Just a few forceful, jagged strokes was all it took, and the cruel task was done. Penny squealed and gasped repeatedly, and her eyes crunched shut with terrible, stifling pain as she tried to deny what had been done.

“*Nooo! No! No! No!*” she bleated, tears flooding her eyes.

At first she panted the frantic words with shrill terror, but in time her cries became quieter. Then, with each futile, whispered plea after that she began to succumb to the reality of her fate. She sobbed and cried with an empty sense of hopelessness, realizing very much that sexual assault had *not been* the motive for the attack upon her. Indeed, true to the promise given, her clothes were not disturbed in even the slightest way. Neither was she attacked again.

The pain started low, centrally, then tore upward, not deep, but searing and agonizing both to her body and mind. Her punishment it seemed was not meant to be rape or even death, but something far more lasting and meaningful. Penny’s attacker made no effort to kill her, and indeed

tried to delay such an outcome. The stranger desired another, far more grim and twisted purpose.

Penny grimaced and spat and quivered as she was left with no choice but to surrender. Her attacker stood close by, facing her, taking in every small struggling movement, then cut the bleating victim's limbs free to enhance the show. Penny felt warmth, then an horrific emptiness, and a short time later she was aware of the rope tightening slightly about her throat as she was lifted just a little more, and of her feet and hands being released and free.

She felt something else too. It was hideous and sickly, and yet her mind would not yield and allow her to pass into unconsciousness to find relief, even when the worst of the pain had subsided.

And while sexual assault had clearly *not been* the intent of the attack, this brought her little comfort. She remained focused and frightened and fully aware of her punishment, and could feel something bumping her feet as they now kicked about in freedom above the grass. And her small hands, now cut free of the tape, made sticky, fumbling, grasping motions in a futile bid to reverse, or at least halt her cruel punishment.

But she knew her efforts were in vain.

She turned her eyes out to sea, unable to deal with the torture of both mind and body, and knew she had been disemboweled...



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