LOVE IN THE CARIBBEAN

by Norsebard

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This alt. action adventure romance is an original story. A couple of the characters may remind you of someone, but they were all created by me.

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This story contains occasional profanity. Readers who are easily offended by bad language may wish to read something other than this story.

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proportions. An intricate sculpture made of candied sugar had been placed on top of the five-feet tall cake, acting as a support for a cluster of candles that formed a big '30'.

The guests immediately shot to their feet clapping and cheering wildly at the cake, and several took pictures of it, bathing the cake, the tuxedoed entertainer and the two waiters in a sea of flashes.

The cart was slowly wheeled down the center of the horseshoe until it reached the end, and Lana Ferguson, recently turned thirty and presently bathed in a cone of light from the spot that was strong enough to peel off the professionally applied makeup that gave her a golden hue to accentuate her Irish green eyes and long, golden-blonde hair.

Standing up and grabbing a long knife with her gloved hand - the emerald green silk glove reached up to her elbow - Lana felt intensely uncomfortable as every single pair of eyes in the entire room were trained on her. The strong light made it impossible for her to see beyond the cake, but she knew that the guests were scrutinizing her like a side of beef at a meat market.

Gulping, she somehow managed to screw a smile on her face and leaned forward to cut the cake, mindful that her $5000 emerald green dress - that made her feel like a huge, green cream puff - wouldn't get stained.

"No, the lights… the candles, darling… blow out the candles first," a man said quietly from somewhere on her left. Recognizing the voice as her father's, Lana let out an embarrassed, endearing, snicker that made all the guests go 'Awww'.

Putting down the knife, she took a deep breath and leaned in even further. With an almighty effort, she blew out the big '30', sending a large plume of smoke towards the ceiling.

As if on cue, all the guests cheered wildly and went back to taking pictures and video of the blushing birthday girl who responded by picking up the knife and cutting a large slice out of the top layer of the cake.

When she offered her father the first slice with the words: "I'm on a diet," the cheers turned to a storm of laughter that gave her a much-needed - if short-lived - reprieve.

Her father laughed along with the rest of the guests, snatching the plate from his daughter's hands and putting it in front of him. "Thank you, darling. I've never said no to cake."

The slick, tuxedoed entertainer cleared his throat and turned his microphone back on. "And now," he said in a voice as soft as melted butter, "it's time…! For…! The cakes…! Cakes for everybody! Let's enjoy ourselves! Let's dance! Let's sing! Let's… bossa nova!"

With a never-ending slide, the entertainer moved back out into the center of the horseshoe and began to belt out a show tune inspired by South American rhythms. While he was singing, the double doors opened again to reveal several groups of waiters pushing carts loaded with smaller birthday layer cakes for all the guests.

Having already finished his first slice of cake, sixty-five year old Alfred Ferguson put down his pastry fork and leaned in towards his daughter. "Isn't this a magnificent party, Lana? The entertainer is pretty good. I must recommend him to some of my clients," he said, straightening his bow tie so it lined up with his tuxedo.

"Yes, Daddy, he is excellent," Lana said, trying to sound as sincere as possible. Even while she was speaking, she felt a bead of sweat trickle down the top of her heavily powdered cleavage, but she knew it would turn into a minor scandal if she did anything about it, so she forced herself to ignore it.

"Once the cakes have been eaten, why don't you do the first dance with Jason?" Alfred said, smiling broadly at his daughter.
Lana looked to her right at the impeccably dressed, impeccably groomed Jason Connell who was busy chatting with his dinner neighbor. In his early thirties, Jason was the well-off son of a well-off stock broker, and as such, the perfect future husband for her, the well-off daughter of an even more well-off merchant banker.

Studying his plucked eyebrows, his heavily gelled hair and his classically shaped, handsome face, Lana had to admit that he looked good and that he would most likely turn out to be a good husband for someone - but to her, despite her father's misconceptions of the nature of their relationship, he was just a beard.

Sighing inwardly, she turned back to her father and offered him a wide, warm smile. "Oh, that's a good idea, Daddy. I'll do that."

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Half an hour later, Jason swept Lana through the hall to the sounds of one of Johann Strauss' evergreen waltzes; moving with grace and agility, the two people awed the guests with their dancing skills.

As the waltz ended, Alfred went into the center of the horseshoe and held up his hands. "Ladies and Gentlemen, honored guests… it's time to give my little girl her birthday presents. Now, let me tell you, when she was but knee high to my office desk, her mother and I never had any problems finding presents for her… if it was pink, she was satisfied." - The guests all laughed - "But these days, it's a bit more difficult. However, I love challenges… in fact, I'd say that I wouldn't be where I am today without welcoming the challenges. Therefore, sweet Lana, take a look at the table at the far side of the hall," Alfred continued, pointing at a table beyond the horseshoe.

Licking her lips in excited anticipation, Lana moved away from Jason - remembering to bow to her dancing partner first, like she was supposed to - and scooted over to the table.

The table was loaded with presents, but one in particular caught her eye. It was a sixteen by sixteen inch platinum picture frame displaying a brownish, seemingly very old piece of paper that had a lot of wiggly lines on it that came together to form some kind of map.

"Oh, Daddy, you shouldn't have!" Lana exclaimed as she picked up the platinum frame to study the map closer. Cray's Point, Reaper's Den, even something called Blackbeard's Castle; all the names on the map were exotic and colorful, and held promises of great wealth or possibly quick death. "Oh, Daddy… is this… is this a treasure map?"

Walking over to stand next to his daughter, Alfred put his hand on her elbow, careful not to knock the frame out of her delicate hand. "It is indeed, my daughter. I know how much you enjoy history. This is supposedly a genuine treasure map from the time of Edward Teach, the great Blackbeard. I was thinking that you could travel down to the US Virgin Islands on your vacation instead of just burying your nose in dusty, old books. That's living history right there," he said, pointing at the frame.

"I love it so much, Daddy," Lana said and carefully put down the frame. Once it was securely on the table, she wrapped her arms around her father and pulled him into a big hug.

"Well, I'm glad. Now, the next present is from…"

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The first thing Lana did once she got out of bed the next day - at one in the afternoon - was to power up her laptop and go online to search for anything and everything she could find on the US Virgin Islands, Blackbeard and the possibility of finding treasure in the Caribbean even three hundred years after the reign of the sea pirates had come to an end.
Snickering happily, Lana rose from her swivel chair at her work desk in her den and padded on bare feet over to the large windows overlooking the park that was located in front of the exclusive apartment complex her flat was in. After cracking open one of the Venetian blinds to check that the groundsman were grooming the lawns like they were supposed to, she padded into her kitchen and turned on her coffee machine.

Once it was blubbering merrily, she picked up the small phone on the kitchen wall and pressed zero to call the reception desk on the ground floor.

'Reception, it's Lauren. How may I help you?' a pleasant female voice said.

"Hello, it's Lana Ferguson in 3C. I'd like three golden slices of toast, some jam of the chef's choice and a grape fruit, please."

'Noted, Miss Ferguson. It will be delivered shortly.'

"Thank you, Lauren. Just tell the bellboy to leave it in the corridor. Goodbye,' Lana said and hung up.

Nodding in a thoroughly satisfied manner, she went into the bathroom, stepped out of her purple silk pajamas and activated her jet shower.

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Fifteen minutes later, Lana unwrapped herself from a large, fluffy towel and threw it on the unmade bed. Briefly standing naked in her bedroom, she purposely avoided looking at herself in the large mirror on the side of the wall and went straight into her walk-in closet to find a new set of underwear to put on.

Once she felt decent, she went back into the bedroom and picked up the pair of comfortable blue jeans and the sweatshirt she had laid out the night before - or rather, at four in the morning when she had been chauffeured home from her birthday bash.

By the time she was fully dressed, the coffee machine had already sent out an electronic ding that indicated that it was ready. Humming one of the show tunes the entertainer had performed at the party, Lana took her keys and unlocked her front door to wheel in the food cart the bellboy had left outside.

After she had put strawberry and blackcurrant jam on the slices of toast, cut the grape fruit in half and poured herself a large mug of coffee, she put a $10 tip on the cart and pushed it back outside.

"And now it's time for St. Thomas," she said out loud and skipped back into her den to see what the search had brought.

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"Hmmm, that's interesting…" she said fifteen minutes later. Pulling her right leg up underneath her, she got comfortable on the swivel chair and began to study one web site in particular.

Called 'Fishing With Skip Swain', it was a colorful site with dozens of pictures of the deep blue sea and glorious white beaches, and of huge marlins and other kinds of fish the customer could supposedly catch while sitting on the back of Captain Swain's fishing boat, the eighty-footer 'Argo'.

As Lana clicked around the site, she became more and more convinced that she had found the right Captain for her treasure hunt. Finally finding a page with pictures of the boat and the crew, Lana put her leg down and leaned forward on her chair to try to see the details of the far-too-small photo. "Oh, why didn't they make it clickable…? It's
so damned small I need Daddy's glasses," she mumbled under her breath as she tried to search for some way to enlarge the tiny picture.

The photo showed two people - a Caucasian and an Afro-Caribbean - standing in front of a long, brown boat. Both tall, they were dressed very differently: the person on the left wore black shades, a floppy hat, blue Bermuda shorts and an impossibly loud and fairly baggy Hawaiian shirt, and the person on the right wore a black or deep blue boiler suit with a shiny zipper on front.

"All right, there's the caption," Lana mumbled out loud, chasing around on the page. "Skipper Joey Swain (left) with Dom Hofstaedter, first mate and mechanic. Huh. Well, that sure doesn't say much… oh…" she continued, quickly clicking on a link labeled 'more'.

'Skipper Joey Swain is a highly experienced off-shore fisherman and scuba diver. Following a six-year career in the US Navy as a diver, Joey created 'Fishing With Skip Swain' from scratch which has since grown to become one of the major fishing tour operators in St. Thomas.'

"Oh, that sounds pretty good… a Navy diver… they know what they're doing. I'll bet I can persuade him to organize a treasure hunt," Lana said and began to chew on her index finger again. Eager to move on, she clicked on another 'more' and began to read the next caption.

'Dom Hofstaedter, a native of St. Thomas, is a gifted mechanic who learned the ropes at the local shipyard. Now, Dom works tirelessly to keep the Argo's twin Napier engines purring to provide an unforgettable experience for their customers.'

Nodding enthusiastically, Lana slammed her hands together in a resounding clap and let out a cross between a squeal and a laugh. "Oh yeah! They're gonna be perfect for my adventure!" she said and skipped over to her cell phone.

After finding her father's number in the registry, she quickly called him and threw herself onto her leather couch while she waited for him to pick it up.

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Alfred Ferguson harrumphed loudly as he put down his fountain pen and reached for his cell phone, interrupting 'In The Hall Of The Mountain King' before it could play for a second time. A quick glance at the display told him who the caller was, and he closed the file he was looking at and waved his secretary off. "It's my daughter, Miss Stern. We'll have to continue the dictation later," he said, leaning back in his leather armchair.

"Very well, Mr. Ferguson," Rebecca Stern said, straightening her gun metal gray skirt as she rose from her chair. With a brief nod at her employer, she held her notepad and her pencil in a firm grip and walked out of the office.

As his secretary closed the door behind her, Alfred pressed the small button and held the phone to his ear. "Good afternoon, darling. Is something wrong?"

'Oh no, I'm just so excited!'

"Well, that's good. Over something positive, I hope?"

'Yes, yes! I've found the perfect tour operators for my little treasure hunt on St. Thomas! It's called Fishing With Skip Swain. You can find it online if you want.'

"Oh, you know I can't do anything with those computers. What did you call it? Fishing With…?"
"Fishing With Skip Swain, Daddy. I've looked it up, Joey Swain is a retired US Navy Diver."

"Oh… well, that's… uh…” 'Not exactly reassuring,' Alfred continued in his thoughts. 'A sailor is a sailor 'til the day he dies… and my little girl would be a fantastic catch for any red-blooded man.' "Uh… interesting," he said out loud, rubbing his brow.

'It's not just interesting, Daddy, it's really exciting!'

"Have you booked a hotel yet?"

'No, no, I wanted to tell you first.'

"Uh, thank you. Listen, Lana, I…”

'Well, it was your idea, you know…'

"I know, I know, it's just… I just don't think you should go alone," Alfred said, knowing full well that his daughter wouldn't take his caution too kindly.

The frosty silence at the other end of the connection proved him right.

'I can take care of myself, Daddy,' Lana said coolly a few heartbeats later.

"Oh, I know, sweetheart, it's just that… uh, I'd feel a lot safer if you had some company on the trip."

'I can't ask Jason to come with me. He's such a busy man, Dad."

"I'm aware of that. I was thinking more along the lines of a chaperone-"

'A chaperone?!'

"Yes, indeed."

'Oh, Daddy…!'

Biting his lip, Alfred had already begun to figure out how much it would cost him to hire a professional security escort when he realized that the perfect chaperone was already working for him. 'Miss Stern!' he thought, breaking out into a wide grin. 'The Ice Queen would be able to keep my daughter at a safe distance from any exploring sailors. Why, she even has her hair in a bun, like an old-fashioned school marm!'

'Daddy? Are you still there? Hello?'

"Oh, I'm still here, darling," Alfred said and moved forward on his armchair. "I've just come up with the perfect plan. Do you remember Miss Stern? Why, I think she would be-"

'Oh… Rebecca Stern, Daddy? She's such a stick in the mud… I'd rather have someone closer to my own age, if you don't mind. I know you have younger secretaries as well. What about… oh, what's her name… the redhead from accounting?"

"Come now, young lady, Rebecca Stern isn't quite that bad. She just takes her job and her life very seriously."
'I'll say! Her name couldn't be more appropriate.'

"Uh, yes. That's quite odd, I'll give you that… but for the age thing, well, darling, that's exactly why it needs to be someone older. Sending two wildcats would be even worse than just one. Listen, sweetheart, I'll ask Miss Stern. She might not even say yes. Put off booking your trip for an hour or so; I promise to call you back as soon as I have her answer. Do we have a deal?"

'Oh… okay, we have a deal, Daddy. Bye, bye. Love you.'

"Love you, too, Sugar. Bye," Alfred said and closed the connection. After tapping the phone against the tip of his nose a couple of times, he stretched out his arm and pressed a button on the intercom on his desk.

'Yes, Mr. Ferguson?' Rebecca Stern said from the outer office.

"Miss Stern, please come back in. I have a proposition for you."

'Yes, Mr. Ferguson.'

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"And there we have it, Miss Stern," Alfred said, patting his secretary on her shoulder as he walked around the back of the chair she was sitting on.

"A trip to St. Thomas?" Rebecca Stern said in a puzzled voice. Forgetting all about her business manners, she furrowed her brow and began to scratch her cheek.

"Yes."

"In the Caribbean?"

"Yes. Are there any other St. Thomases?" Alfred Ferguson said with a cheeky gleam in his eye.

"Hmm… I don't know, Mr. Ferguson."

In her mid-forties, Rebecca Stern was a clean-cut, no-nonsense woman who felt most comfortable in what she called her daily uniform: a gun metal gray skirt and blazer jacket over a white shirt she always kept buttoned up to just below her chin to hide what she felt was an ungainly, overweight body. Not a believer in jewelry or accessories, she didn't even wear nail polish or lipstick - instead, she let her chocolate brown eyes and her ash blonde, shoulder-length hair that framed her round, but far from unpretty, face speak for themselves.

What Alfred Ferguson didn't know was that Rebecca Stern was a lesbian - and in fact, the only person Lana Ferguson had ever confided in. Those thoughts and more flashed through Rebecca's mind, but in the end, she came to the conclusion that Lana was too inexperienced in the matters of the world to take care of herself, and that she would need all the protection she could get. 'Especially from a couple a' sailors!'

"All right, Mr. Ferguson, I accept. I'll accompany your daughter. When do we leave?" Rebecca said, shifting her legs to cross them the other way.

"Oh, I don't know yet. I promised I'd call her back when I had your answer. I'll do that now. Perhaps you could stay while I do that?"

"But of course, Mr. Ferguson."
The split second Lana's phone rang, she jumped up from her swivel chair and dove onto her couch. Sweeping the phone off the table with a slightly less-than-graceful gesture, she quickly spun onto her back and put the phone to her ear. "It's me," she said with bated breath.

'Hello again, Darling. Well, I have good news. Miss Stern has accepted. She'd very much like to come with you.'

"Oh, well… that's… that's very nice, Daddy," Lana said and scooted up so she could put her head on the armrest of the couch.

'Yes, I thought so. Are you going to book the flight and the hotel now?'

"Yes, I am. Please tell Miss Stern that I'll send the details to her in an email."

A slightly prolonged pause followed, prompting Lana to check if the connection was still active. "Daddy?"

'How come you have Miss Stern's email address, Lana?'

'Uh-oh,' Lana thought, thinking back to the reason why she actually had it - an office party two years previously that had seen her drink too much rum-laced punch. When the alcohol had hit her empty stomach, she had felt an unstoppable urge to connect with someone and lament the fact that she had been forced to hide her sexuality from her parents since before her sixteenth birthday. That someone had been Rebecca Stern; a blessing in disguise as it had turned out.

Swinging her legs over the side of the couch, Lana sat up straight and ran a hand through her long hair. "Oh, I have it in case you didn't answer a call… perhaps you'd be in an important meeting… or something. With the email, I could leave a message."

'Oh… of course. Good thinking, sweetheart. Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm sure you'll give your credit card a good workout. Please send Miss Stern a mail once everything has been sorted out.'

"I will, Daddy. Please thank Miss Stern from me." - 'Not the least for keeping my secret,' Lana thought, biting the inside of her cheek.

'Oh, that's a given, Sugar. Talk to you later.'

"Bye, Daddy," Lana said and closed the connection. Sighing deeply, she put the phone back down on the coffee table and shuffled over to her laptop. A few moments - and dark thoughts - later, she flipped open the lid and continued writing the email she was preparing for Joey Swain.

'New York City, April 7th, 2012.

Dear Mr. Swain,

I know this is on terribly short notice, but I'd like to book your services for a seven-day period: Saturday, April 21st to Saturday, April 28th.
To compensate for the lateness of my mail, I am willing to add a bonus to your regular going price of $2998 for the week by offering you an additional $1502, making it a round $4500.

If you can accept my booking, please prepare your boat for two passengers, myself and another woman. If absolutely necessary, we can share a cabin; however, I would greatly prefer a single cabin, for the sake of privacy. I hope such an arrangement will be possible.

I read on your web site that a full scuba certificate is compulsory; neither of us have one yet, but it will be in order by April 21st.

Please get back to me as soon as possible with your reply - I'm hoping it will be a confirmation.

Thank you in advance.

Yours,

Lana Ferguson.

After reading the letter several times - and finding the typo that had snuck in when she hadn't been paying attention - Lana moved the cursor up to her email-client's Send button and clicked on it.

"Well..." she said and leaned back on her swivel chair. "That's that. Let's see what happens. All right, in the meantime, I better go on a scouting mission for some new clothes... after all, I can't show up in my old rags," she mumbled to herself as she opened a new tab in her browser and began to type in the name of a well-known online retailer.

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Meanwhile, more than sixteen hundred miles further South, Josephine 'Joey' Swain - now thirty-eight but as fit as ever - was rudely stirred from her afternoon nap by her laptop playing a sound bite from Star Trek The Next Generation, making Lieutenants Worf's deep voice send an echoing 'Captain, incoming message,' through the relatively small pilot house of the Argo.

"What the hell…? Who installed that?" she said, lazily scratching her chest. When the scratching wasn't effective, she undid another button in her well-worn blue-and-red Hawaiian shirt and reached inside to give the offending spot below her left breast a good rubdown.

Feeling much calmer after the crisis had been dealt with, Joey pushed her floppy hat back from her sky blue eyes and got up from her old wooden Captain's chair. After going through a very thorough yawn-and-stretch routine that made all the joints in her back pop and creak, she shuffled over to the laptop that had been placed on the window sill.

Once there, she took a moment to look through the window and down at her first mate, Dominique Hofstaedter - better known as Oily Rags, or just Olly Rags - who was sunbathing on a towel on the forward deck; as naked as the day she was born, she was doing her damnest to look like a Caribbean Queen as she lay there with a glistening sheen of perspiration covering her shapely, chocolate brown body.

Shaking her head and chuckling out loud, Joey concentrated on the laptop and the email that had just arrived. "Dear Mister Swain, ha! Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, forty-five hundred bucks! Awright! Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, April twenty-first… shouldn't be a problem," Joey said, shuffling over to her plotting table to find her order book.

Quickly leafing through the mostly empty book, it didn't take her long to arrive at the blank page otherwise known as April, 2012. "Uh-huh, like I said," she mumbled and returned to the laptop to read the rest of the mail.

"Single cabin… uh-huh. All right, we can do that," she said, making a little note in the order book. "'For the sake of privacy.' Boy, is she in for a surprise… the Argo isn't a cruise liner. We only got six cabins… one for me, one for Olly; two for the guests and two for various supplies," Joey said out loud, wishing she had a fresh cigar to chew on instead of her cheek.

Suddenly getting an irresistible urge to light up, Joey began to pat herself down but soon realized that she had left her cigars in her cabin. "About face!" she said out loud before shuffling off to get her indispensable stogies.

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A scant minute later, she pulled the curtain to her cabin aside and went straight for the case of cigars that she had mistakenly left on the minuscule table next to her bunk. Holding her favorite Zippo under the tip of the stogie, she huffed and puffed on it to get it to ignite. When it finally caught, she inhaled deeply and sent out a pale blue cloud of smoke that slowly dissipated towards the low ceiling of the cabin. "Oh yeah, this is life…" she said and sat down on her bunk.

Looking around the small cabin, she realized that she needed to clean up the mess left behind by her latest female acquaintance who had been with her the night before - a pair of panties and a broken pair of cheap sunglasses.

Shrugging, she picked up the sunglasses and threw them into the trash. The panties weren't an expensive brand, but the thought still crossed her mind to find the female acquaintance and hand them back to her - then it dawned on her that she didn't know the woman's real name, only her stage name from the dance club where they had met.

Letting out a grunt that sounded like a cross between a snort and a cough, Joey tried to hold the panties against her hips, but when they proved to be at least five inches too small for her, she shrugged again and threw them into the trash. "I guess she did kinda have snake hips," she said and got off the bunk.
Moving back out of her cabin, she closed the curtain - chuckling at the little sowed-on patch that said 'Kaptin's Kwarters' like she invariably did - and checked the two guest compartments to see if any embarrassing items had been left in there as well.

When she had established that they were fairly clean and presentable - or as clean and presentable as they could be aboard a re-fitted ex-US Navy Fast Patrol Boat of 1966 vintage - she pulled the curtains to and moved down to the end of the narrow corridor to get to the forward hatch.

Stretching up to her full height of five foot eleven, Joey reached up and loosened the large wheel that locked the hatch in place. Stepping up on the built-in metal ladder, she climbed up into the hatch and stuck her head out on the forward deck, right next to Olly's nude, Goddess-like body.

"Hey, Olly," Joey said, puffing on her cigar and wiggling her eyebrows like a wannabe Groucho Marx.

"Hey, Skip," Dominique said in a rich, velvety voice that held a distinct trace of the local dialect. The forty-two year old native of St. Thomas rolled over onto her right and propped her head up on her arm, making her full bosom slide towards her right.

"How's the sun today?"

"Warm."

"No shit?"

"No," Olly said and ran her hand down her stomach and onto her ample hipbone to show Joey the perspiration.

"I don't know why you bother… I don't think you can get any browner, Olly," Joey said, looking admiringly at the older woman's swooping curves.

"Oh ha, ha. I'll bet it took ya an hour to come up with that one."

"Yeah, more or less. Do you want me to add some sun tan lotion…?"

Pointing at the half-used bottle next to her shoulder, Olly shook her head. "Naw, I got it covered… literally."

"Okay. Shit. Anyway… believe it or not, we've actually got ourselves a booking," Joey said, putting her arms on the edges of the hatch. "In two weeks' time. A nice lady from New York City called Lana Ferguson. She's offered us forty-five hundred dollars for a week. I think we'd be a couple a' raving imbeciles if we turned her down."

"Sounds good, Skip. What's the catch?"

"Well, I'm not sure there is one."

Letting out a loud laugh, Olly flopped onto her back and took a wide-brimmed hat that she used to fan her face. "Trust me, Joey. There's always a catch. What is it?"

"Uh, she said that she'd be travelling with another woman…? Other than that, I can't see any drawbacks, Olly. We really need the dough, you know that."

"Oh I know that, all right. I'm still surprised how high my last paycheck bounced when I tried to cash it in!" Olly said, chuckling darkly.
"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I guess the money hadn't cleared yet… or something."

"Or something. Hey, perhaps this Lana and the other woman are secret lovers trying to get away from their husbands?"

"Uhhh… that's not the vibe I got from the email, Olly."

"Or a couple a' nuns on the run from a convent?"

"Now that's definitely not the vibe I got," Joey said and knocked off some ash onto the deck. "Ah, we just have to wait and see. I'll go back up and answer the email right way. Which reminds me, did you install that new sound the laptop makes when there's a new mail?"

"If you didn't do it, I guess it musta' been me, Skip," Olly said and rolled over onto her stomach. Raising her lower legs in the air, she began to swing them back and forth while she looked at Joey and waited for the inevitable answer.

The inevitable answer wasn't long in coming - "Cheeky so-and-so," Joey said and gave Olly's ample butt cheeks a couple of gentle pats before she slipped back down the hatch, hearing Olly's characteristic velvet chuckle as she did so.

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Five minutes later, Joey clicked on Send to mail her affirmative answer back to Lana Ferguson from New York City. Nodding to herself, she closed the lid of her laptop and sat down in her Captain's chair - almost at once, she got back up and went over to the fridge where she got herself a cold can of beer.

Cracking it open, she took a few long swigs before sitting down to resume her nap. Sliding her floppy hat forward - mindful of the fiery tip of her cigar - she leaned back in the chair, let out a contented sigh and a small beer-induced burp, and snuggled down.

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Punching the air in delight, Lana spun around three times on her swivel chair to mark the special occasion. Letting out a loud "Yippie!", she immediately clicked on Print to have a hard copy of the email in case something would go wrong.

"Oh, this is going to be the greatest adventure of my life!" she said ecstatically, jumping up from her chair. When she realized that she better book the flights and the hotel at once so she wouldn't run into any sell-outs, she sat down again and began to click furiously to find the best airline for the task - a few minutes later, she had booked two return tickets from New York-JFK to the Cyril E. King Airport on St. Thomas, the only major airport in the entire US Virgin Islands area.

Once that was done, she continued with the hotel reservations, finding a very nice holiday resort in the heart of Charlotte Amalie, the capitol of St. Thomas.

Quickly clicking on the Print button, Lana snatched the pages even before they had fully cleared the printer. A thorough double-check later, she put the airline booking confirmation, the hotel reservations and the mail Joey Swain had sent her into her top desk drawer and closed it with such reverence that it bordered on the obsessive.
While she had the laptop up and running, she quickly put together a mail for Rebecca Stern with the dates and details the stern secretary slash chaperone would need. About to click on the Send button, Lana suddenly felt unsure of the tone of the letter, and decided to go back to re-read it.

'Dear Miss Stern,

I've booked two tickets for AmerAir on Saturday 21st, 2012 at ten a.m. Because of the heightened security these days, we need to be there at eight at the latest.

On St. Thomas, I've booked two adjacent suites in the Long Bay Resort on Alton Adams Drive. It's only a four star hotel, but the suites look pretty good.

I'll swing by with your tickets. See you then.

Yours,

Lana Ferguson.'

"No, it's too impersonal," Lana said after a little while. Pushing up her sleeves, she moved back to the keyboard and added, 'Thank you for wanting to come with me to St. Thomas. I realize that my Father put you on the spot, but I'm really grateful that you've accepted the terms. I'm hoping this trip won't cause too many problems for you on a personal level…?".

"Yeah. Much better. After all, we're going to be really close together for a full week… if we're not on friendly terms, it'll be hell," Lana mumbled quietly before clicking on Send.

"Great, that's done. Oh, and my new outfits will be delivered within a few work days… couldn't be better, could it, Lana?" she continued, putting her hands behind her neck and whistling a happy little tune.

Her happy mood only lasted for less than a minute. Suddenly overcome with the strangest feeling in her heart - perhaps even a premonition of something she couldn't quite grasp what was - Lana felt she needed to take a step back from the events, and she leaned back in her chair and began to ponder what the grand adventure might mean for her.

'It's not the treasure… realistically, I'll never find any. No, it's… it's finding myself. Yes… It's finding out who I really am. I'm thirty years old now and I don't even dare tell my Daddy that I'm… who I am. But on such a trip, I could make a fresh start. I could talk to Rebecca Stern about her experiences… a heart to heart, perhaps… if she'd talk to me.'
Sighing deeply, Lana rubbed her face and moved away from her laptop. Shutting it down and closing the lid, she decided to clear her mind of the unexpected dark thoughts by going to the gym room in the basement of the apartment building.

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The Wellness & Fitness Center was as busy as always and she needed to wait for a few minutes before her favorite exercise equipment, the treadmill, became available. Stepping onto it, she quickly punched in the data on the electronic touch screen - the tempo, the music she wanted to listen to and the movie that would be playing on the eighty inch flatscreen TV in front of the treadmill.

Deciding on a music selection called Ethnic Rhythms and a movie called Hawaii at Dawn, she plugged in her own earphones, hit Start and began to jog in place, slowly climbing in tempo until she was at the level she preferred, hoping that it would blow away the dark clouds that had suddenly invaded her golden fantasy.

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CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later.

Stepping out of the historical terminal building on St. Thomas, Lana stopped in the middle of the forecourt and took a very deep breath to fill her lungs with the clean, but warm, island air.

"We have arrived," she said quietly to herself as she took off her sunglasses and her wide-brimmed, floppy hat to be able to take in the sights. Everywhere she looked, she could see nothing but clear blue skies and plenty of tropical vegetation, and her nose immediately picked up a certain exotic scent she most decidedly wasn't used to from New York City.

"We certainly have... now how do we get to the hotel, Miss Ferguson?" Rebecca Stern said, pulling along their fully stocked baggage trolley.

Groaning inwardly, Lana put her sunglasses and her hat back on and turned around to face her travelling partner. "Miss Stern, how often do I have to tell you that I want you to call me Lana...? Please!"

"And how often do I have to tell you that it makes me feel uncomfortable? I prefer to call you Miss Ferguson, so that's what I'll do," the stern chaperone said, adjusting her gray suit and white shirt that had already begun to get a bit constricting in the stifling heat. "Oh, there's a shuttle coach. Perhaps the driver will know how to get to the hotel," she continued, pulling the trolley towards a row of coaches parked at the curb.

Sighing, Lana took off her sunglasses again and looked at the gray figure who stuck out like a sore thumb among the bright colors that everyone else wore, including herself. She had been unable to decide on what to wear until the very last moment, but ultimately, she had sent back most of the Safari-style clothing she had bought because she had come to realize they would most likely be horribly impractical. Instead, she had settled for a few, classic garments, like t-shirts and Bermuda shorts, and the breezy, yellow, Brazilian-style pant suit she was wearing now.

When Rebecca Stern waved at her to get her to come to the coach, Lana sighed for the umpteenth time since they had left NYC and began to walk along the sidewalk to get to the white shuttles.
"Miss Ferguson, the driver has explained that we can just hop onboard with our luggage. He doesn't have a stop at
the hotel itself, the bus can't get up the narrow streets, you see, but he's promised to let us know when we're close to
the hotel," Rebecca Stern said, standing in the open door.

"Well, that's something at least. I'll buy two tickets. Would you mind handling our bags?" Lana said and stepped up
into the coach, sending the driver a friendly smile as she reached for her purse.

"No problem, Miss Ferguson," Rebecca said flatly, looking with a great deal of resignation at the five heavy
suitcases on the baggage trolley.

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"Miss Ferguson, will you relax? We're only going twenty-five miles an hour!" Rebecca Stern whispered to a visible
spooked Lana who was clenching her fists so hard that her knuckles had turned white.

"But we're driving on the wrong side of the road! What is he, nuts? You said it would be all right!" Lana said
through clenched teeth. Unclenching her fists, she immediately grabbed the backrest of the seat ahead of her to have
something to do with her hands.

Rolling her eyes out of sight of her employer's daughter, Rebecca leaned in towards the frightened woman and
spoke in a voice she usually only used for her sister's children. "Miss Ferguson, on the Virgin Islands, everybody
drives on the left. It's the law here."

"Nonsense, isn't it a part of the United States? Unless I'm really, *really* mistaken, we don't drive on the left!"

"Well, they do here. Why don't you relax a little and look at the beautiful landscape? Look at the picturesque way
the city stretches up the hills," Rebecca said and pointed out of the window at the hundreds of large and small
houses that had been built scaling the hills of the central part of the island.

Forcing herself to calm down, Lana looked out of the windows of the shuttle coach. Slowly beginning to appreciate
the local flavor a bit more, the lush vegetation, the vivid colors and the sight of street vendors hawking various items
from pushcarts instilled a sense of adventure in her that she didn't know she was capable of fostering.

Leaning back in the seat, she let out the nervous breath she had been holding ever since she got onboard the coach,
and let herself be awed by the splendor of the island.

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Fifteen minutes later, they waved at the bus driver as he drove off with a few honks. Turning around, Lana picked
up two of her own bags and quickly ran across Long Bay Road, the busy street that separated the main part of
Charlotte Amalie from the harbor.

Reaching the other side, she put the bags down again and looked out over the many yachts moored in the harbor,
trying to find the easily recognizable silhouette of Skip Swain's boat, the Argo.

When she couldn't spot it anywhere, she scrunched up her face and began to wonder if they were about to run into
problems. As Rebecca crossed the street with the remaining three suitcases, Lana tapped her shoulder and pointed at
the harbor.

"Well, there's the harbor, but I can't find our boat."

"Didn't you get its berth number?"
"Uh, berth number?"

"I'm sure the piers must be numbered somehow. Or perhaps we could ask in the harbor master's office," Rebecca said, nodding towards a low building on the other side of the street.

"Good thinking, Rebecca," Lana said with a smile, hoping to warm up the frosty air that had somehow developed between them. "Tell you what, let me take one of your suitcases. I can handle it," she continued, bending down to pick up the smallest of the three bags Rebecca had hauled across the street.

"Oh… thank you, Miss Ferguson."

Groaning inwardly, Lana shot her chaperone an exasperated look. "Lana, Rebecca. My name is Lana."

"Miss Ferguson," Rebecca Stern said strongly to underline her preference, "once we get to the hotel, I would very much like a shower. Can we put off looking for the ship until I've had one?"

"Sure, but."

"If you can't wait, you're free to go down here on your own… but please don't get involved in any kind of trouble. If you're accosted, I'll lose my job."

"I can take care of myself, Miss Stern!" Lana growled and picked up her own two bags and the small suitcase. "Come on, let's get to the hotel. It's not far," she said angrily, stomping up one of the narrow streets in a huff.

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An hour later, a freshly showered Rebecca and a grumbling, impatient Lana walked through a gate welcoming guests to the Long Bay Yacht Haven Grande and into the harbor itself.

Still not sure where the Argo might be moored, Lana decided on venturing out onto the first pier to look for it. Along the pier, she spotted many expensive, beautiful yachts, but not the one she was looking for, so when she reached the end, she sat down on a concrete bollard to come up with a strategy that would help them.

Pushing her floppy hat back on her head to see better, Lana shielded her eyes from the murderous sun and slowly moved her head from left to right while she scanned the rest of the harbor.

"Can you see anything, Miss Ferguson?" Rebecca Stern said, wearing another of her patented gun metal gray suits over a white shirt that had been buttoned up to just below her chin.

"Not yet," Lana said, secretly wondering how on Earth the uptight chaperone could survive wearing such an outfit in the stifling late April heat. Even in her breezy pant suit, Lana could still feel the occasional drop of sweat run down her back and her stomach, and she was almost afraid to think how hot it would be underneath Rebecca's tightly buttoned shirt.

Standing up, Rebecca scanned the harbor as well, looking in the other direction to Lana. "It's quite a large boat, isn't it, Miss Ferguson?"

"Well, on the original web site, it said that it was an eighty-footer, yes."

"I think I've found it… or at least, a boat that size… the only one in the harbor," Rebecca said, pointing at a boat several hundred yards away on the far side of the Long Bay Yacht Haven Grande.
"Oh! Where?" Lana said and shot up from the bollard.

"There," Rebecca said, crouching down to show the shorter Lana exactly what she meant.

Staring at the boat that was held in battleship gray instead of mahogany brown like it was supposed to be, Lana had to rub her eyes several times. When the behemoth was still ungainly even after the third rub, she just knew deep down inside that she'd been had by the promotional pictures on the web site. "What. The. Hell. Is. That. Thing?" she said in a dark, menacing voice.

"Looks like some kind of war ship," Rebecca said flatly, taking a sliding step back from Lana and the explosion she was sure would follow.

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Fifteen minutes later, Lana came to an abrupt stop at the end of the pier the farthest away from the city. The four-foot wide name painted onto the hull of the ungainly war ship confirmed her worst fears - 'ARGO - St. Thomas, US VI.'

She quickly rubbed her eyes again to make sure that she hadn't been hallucinating the whole time - but no, the boat remained in the water in front of her.

Moored to the pier with no less than four heavy ropes, the long and curiously low boat bobbed gently up and down as the waves hit its battleship-gray hull. The Stars and Stripes flew proudly at the stern of the ship, but that was the only sign of life, apart from an unseen transistor radio blaring out an old rock'n'roll hit - appropriately enough, Trouble in Paradise by The Crests.

Feeling her enthusiasm and her sense of adventure get flushed down the proverbial toilet, Lana walked slowly along the length of the boat to take in the entire ghastliness.

The boat was undoubtedly a re-fitted war ship, that much was clear from the broad-shouldered, no-nonsense design, the microscopic portholes and an odd contraption at the stern that looked like it had been a machine gun nest once upon a time.

The bridge of the boat was far lower than usual, and it seemed to be armor-plated and reinforced with strangely-shaped windows which gave it an odd, flat-top-like appearance. On top of the bridge, four unusually long antennas swayed gently in the breeze blowing in from the ocean.

"This is not a fishing boat... this is the frickin' USS Enterprise!" Lana exclaimed loudly, throwing her hands in the air. "The only thing missing is a couple a' frickin' torpedo tubes!"

Even though the gangway was lowered, Lana stomped right past it to get back to Rebecca - her next stop, the harbor master's office.

Lana and Rebecca both had to do a double-take at the size of the harbor master when he opened the door to his office a little while later. In his mid-fifties, the man weighed at least three hundred lbs., a fact that was very much underlined by the sheen of sweat on his dark brown face and in the way his white uniform was nearly bursting at the seams as it tried to stretch across his gut.

"Oh..." he said in a surprised voice as he saw the two women waiting outside. "Good afternoon, ladies, I'm-"
Lana Ferguson didn't have time for trivialities; instead, she just barged into the office and stepped up to the desk, crossing her arms over her chest and tapping her foot on the wooden floor. "I'm here to file an official complaint over one of the boats moored here."

"Everett Pearce," the man continued, chuckling in a deep rumble that made his large body shake. "I'm the harbor master, but I suspect you know that already."

Stepping into the office, Rebecca shook hands with the man. "We do, Mr. Pearce. I'm Rebecca Stern and this is Miss Lana Ferguson. Sorry for intruding like this, but we have a little situation."

"I can tell," Everett said as he closed the door and inched his way around the desk to get to his swivel chair. "You said you were here to file a complaint?"

"That's right," Lana said strongly. "I have been played like a fool by one of the tour operators."

"Oh? Which one?"

"Joey Swain!"

That information made Everett Pearce stop what he was doing and stare at the irate woman with an unreadable expression on his face. "Joey Swain?" he echoed after a few seconds.

"Joey Swain, indeed, Mr. Pearce." Eyeing the harbor master's computer, Lana suddenly realized that she had the perfect evidence at her fingertips, and leaned forward to tap on the plastic casing of the monitor. "Are you online, Sir?"

"Yes…?"

"Well, if you go to Joey Swain's web site, you can see exactly what I mean, and in living color, I might add. Please do!"

"All right, all right," Everett said, clicking away to start his Internet browser. A few seconds and a quick search later, he entered the web site and soon found the promotional photos.

"There! That's the boat, Mr. Pearce!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Ferguson… I'm not sure what you're getting at," Everett said, wiping his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

"That's not the way the boat looks now… now, it's some kind of… of… war ship!"

Smirking, Everett Pearce leaned back in his chair. "Well, I don't know how to tell you, but it's always been a war ship. It's a re-fitted fast patrol boat from the Vietnam war. I can't see the big problem, Miss…?"

"War ships are cramped and noisy and uncomfortable and… and I'll be damned if I'm to spend a week at sea in such a thing… I've transferred nearly five thousand dollars to Joey Swain's account, and I want my money back, Sir!"

Everett sighed and rose from his chair to go over to his filing cabinet. "Look, Miss Ferguson," the harbor master said as he pulled out a file and sat down at his desk, "I see what you mean, but I can assure you that they're not trying to fool you. Joey Swain, Olly Rags and the Argo are very well known around here… and much-loved, I might add."
"But Mr. Pearce! Look at this picture," Lana said and shot up from her uncomfortable armchair. Reaching over the harbor master's desk, she turned his monitor around and tapped her index finger on the plastic surface. "That's what I paid for, not a battleship!"

Looking decidedly fed up with the increasingly bossy tourist, Everett Pearce leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you know why it looks different now, Miss Ferguson?"

"Of course not, Mr. Pearce. How could I?" Lana answered abruptly, mirroring the harbor master's posture.

"It looks different now because Joey just worked non-stop for an entire week giving it a new coat of paint so it would be in tip-top shape for the next guest… which I'm guessing is *you*, Miss Ferguson."

"Oh… uh… okay," Lana said, suddenly feeling mightily embarrassed. Deflating like a leaky balloon, she sat down on the chair and began to chew on her lips, unsure how to continue the conversation.

Grunting, Everett reached for his cell phone and flipped it open. "I'll give Joey a call. When she gets here, you can square it among yourselves. It's not really a job for the harbor master."

Rebecca picked up the unexpected qualifier at once, and she furrowed her brow as the implications began to swirl around in her mind. Looking at Lana, she could see that the dots hadn't yet been connected, and she suddenly felt a need to get the two out of them out of there before Lana would realize that the color of the boat wasn't the only thing she'd had misconceptions about.

Lana, still oblivious to the finer details, let out an quiet snort and began to fiddle with her fingernails. "You do that, Sir. I just wish he had been clearer on the type of his boat in the original mail he sent me."

"Who's 'he', Miss Ferguson? Joey Swain is a woman," Everett Pearce said, furrowing his considerable brow.

"I… beg… your… pardon…?" Lana said, opening up her face to such an extent that it became several inches longer than usual. Rebecca just groaned and clapped a hand across her eyes.

"Josephine Swain… but please don't tell her I mentioned her real name, she'll kill me slowly… Miss Ferguson, with all due respect… I think you need glasses," the harbor master said. When he got in touch with Joey, his face lit up in a smile and he leaned forward to look Lana in the eye. "Hey Joey, it's Everett. We have a little problem over here."

Unable to hold the large man's pointed look, Lana just smirked and looked down at her fingers.

'Hey, Everett. Wow, it must be an epidemic or something. I've got a problem, too. My only customer of the entire month is running late. I've just been on the horn with the airport and they say that she and her friend were on the plane… but they haven't shown up here,' Joey's dulcet tones said from the other end of the connection.

"Well… your customers are here, Joey. Seems there's a small problem with your boat."

'Uhhh… like what? I mean, it's still floating and everything."

"You better come over to the office and find out for yourself. Okay?"

'Sure, Everett. I'll be with you in, oh, ten minutes. I just need to pull up my pants. You kinda caught me on the crapper."

"That would be best, Joey. See ya," Everett said and closed the connection. "She'll be over shortly," he said to Lana and Rebecca.
"Oh, goodie. I can't wait," Rebecca mumbled, rubbing her face.

Finding a fan in his top desk drawer, Everett leaned back in his chair - making the swivel chair creak and groan under his weight - and began to fan himself. "Ladies, let me tell you a story about Joey Swain. Just over two years ago, my little boy Bobby visited me at work in conjunction with a project his pre-school class was doing. I had a really busy day and couldn't stay in my office the whole time. When I got back from collecting the harbor fee from a Venezuelan yacht that had arrived over night, I was startled to see ambulances and the police waiting for me. I soon learned that my son had ventured out on his own and had fallen off one of the piers."

"Oh, God," Lana exclaimed. "Wh-what happened to him? Was he all right?"

"He was fine, Miss Ferguson, because of Joey Swain. You see, Joey happened to be on the deck of the Argo out on the farthest pier, and she watched him fall in. Without hesitation, she stripped down to her bare essentials and took a swan dive off the top of her boat… and *swam* across the harbor to save my boy, faster than anyone had ever done."

"God…"

"When she reached the spot where he had fallen in, she dove to the bottom of the harbor and rescued him. She was able to get him up in time, and today, he's as fit as a fighting rooster. And that is all Joey's doing. So please, Miss Ferguson, cut her some slack."

"Yes… I… well. I hadn't expected such a dramatic story, Mr. Pearce. So she really is a Navy diver?" Lana said, chewing on her fingernails.

"Oh yes. She was dishon… uh…" - Everett realized he was about to relay a little too much information to complete strangers, so he bit it back and went another route - "She retired a few years ago. Of course, with Joey being Joey, there's always a little twist to the story. Now, I've never been the fastest man on earth, so by the time I got there, she had already climbed up on the pier, standing there like some kind of water goddess in nothing but her Navy tattoos and a pair of soaked minis, watching the paramedics treat my boy… and holding a fine issued by the police for being topless in public."

"God, no! How rude!" Lana said loudly, slapping her hand down on her thigh.

"What's rude?" a dulcet female voice said behind them, causing Rebecca and Lana to turn around and look at the doorway.

"Everett, you didn't tell them that old story, did ya?" Joey continued as she closed the door behind her.

"Of course I did, Joey. Welcome. This is Miss Stern and Miss Ferguson," Everett said and pointed at Rebecca and Lana respectively.

Lana was on the brink of swallowing her tongue when she got her first close-up look of Joey Swain. Looking nothing at all like the blurry picture Lana had found on the web site, Joey was tall, beefy and broad-shouldered with a full, but not heavy, bosom, luscious lips and a gorgeous face with the bluest eyes Lana had ever witnessed. 'Wow… *that's* a woman… a woman with a capital W,' Lana thought, instinctively licking her lips at the sight.

Rebecca - being more worldly and experienced - was slightly less awed by the retired diver, but she still got up from her chair and put out her hand. "Hello, Miss Swain. We've heard a lot about you," she said in a friendly voice.

"Have ya? Why am I not surprised. And it's not Miss Swain, okay? It's Joey or Skipper. I won't answer to anything else," Joey said. She briefly checked out the woman with the bun in her hair, but soon zeroed in on the cute, little blonde who was still sitting in her chair, wearing a reddish facial color that reminded Joey of a lobster's rear end.
"Hiya, Miss," Joey said and stepped forward with her hand stretched out ahead of her.

Smiling nervously, Lana rose from her chair and put out her hand.

The split second their hands touched, a small arc of electricity jumped from Lana to Joey, making the tall woman move her hand back at the speed of light and let out a pained hiss. "Ouch! Hell, talk about a bolt from the blue…! Man!" she said, waving her hand back and forth to get rid of the numbness.

Putting her hand to her mouth, Lana gulped loudly and turned even redder. "Oh, I'm… t-terribly sorry, Mr. Swain…"

"There she goes again with the Mister thing. Lady, you need some glasses," Everett said and reopened the file, hoping to finally get some peace and quiet so he could get back to the paperwork he'd been doing.

"I'll see to it, Sir," Rebecca said and put her arm around Lana's shoulder. "Come on, Miss Ferguson, why don't we go outside? I think you need some fresh air."

Grinning broadly, Joey opened the door and held it open for the two guests. "Apres-vous, mademoiselles," she said, bowing slightly as Rebecca led the near-comatose Lana out of the office. "See ya, Everett," she continued, saluting the harbor master.

"Bye, Joey. Take care of yourself. These ladies are a couple of landlubbers if you ask me," Everett said before flashing Joey a wide grin.

"Uh-huh," Joey said, closing the door behind her.

"Do you speak French, Miss Sw… uh, I mean Skip?" Rebecca said as she put Lana down on a wooden bench outside the office.

"Not really, but I guess I've picked up a few things here and there. Listen, I think your friend here's got heatstroke. I know the red is particularly noticeable on her because she's so fair, but that shade isn't natural," Joey said, crouching down next to Lana.

"Uh, yeah."

Reaching up, Joey touched Lana's cheek with surprising gentleness, a gesture that only caused the blonde woman to blush even harder. "Miss Ferguson, are you all right?"

Unable to speak for entirely embarrassing reasons, Lana just nodded and shrugged.

"Okay…" Joey said and scratched her cheek. Looking around, she tried to find something she could use as a fan, but came up short. "Tell ya what, why don't ya come back with me to the Argo? I've got a lovely fridge filled with all kinds of cold drinks. I'm bound to have something for your tastes…? Eh?"

"Okay," Lana squeaked. As she tried to get a grip on the four billion thoughts that were racing through her mind, she was unable to find the one that would explain why this woman - impressive though she was - had had such a huge impact on her so quickly. 'All right, she's one of the most beautiful…and sexy, God…! …women I've ever laid eyes on, but…it's not like I've lived in a cave for the last fifteen years. But, oh God…when I locked eyes with her, I felt it…felt it inside…felt every single one of my inner muscles clench and unclench at once…!' Getting up, Lana leaned against Rebecca rather than Joey - she simply didn't dare get too close to the woman-with-a-capital-W. After a few seconds, she loosened up and was able to walk up the same pier they had used earlier.
Joey put her hand on her hips and tracked the two tourists with her eyes. After a few seconds, she let out a throaty chuckle and followed them back to her boat.

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"Put your leg here, Miss," Joey said, trying to guide the wobbly Lana onto the gangway.

Miraculously, Lana was able to walk up the gangway unassisted, but as soon as she reached the top, she hurriedly leaned against the battleship-gray bulkhead and looked down at Joey and Rebecca who were still standing at the foot of the gangway.

"Is she always like this when she's in the sun?" Joey said out of the corner of her mouth.

"I wouldn't know, Skip. This is the first time I'm accompanying Miss Ferguson," Rebecca said, easily ascending the gangway.

Walking up behind Rebecca, Joey found herself wondering how in Sam Hill the overdressed woman was able to stay cool underneath all those clothes. 'Oh… what's your relationship, anyhow…? If ya don't mind me askin'.'

"I'm the secretary of Miss Ferguson's father. As you probably know from the emails, Miss Ferguson is here on a treasure hunt. She was given a historical treasure map for her birthday. Supposedly one of Blackbeard's maps, actually."

"Oh, is that a fact? Well, Miss Ferguson… I might as well tell ya sooner rather than later," Joey said and waved her floppy hat in her face to get some air. "Ninety percent of the so-called genuine treasure maps are faker than a three dollar bill."

"This one is real," Lana squeaked, staring at a few drops of sweat that had pooled on Joey's exposed throat. 'Soon, those drops of sweat will fall down… down between her breasts… her round, full, brea- oh, snap out of it!'

Misinterpreting the new wave of red that covered Lana's face, Joey began to wave her hat in the blonde woman's direction to bring her some air, too. "Uh-huh? Well, for your sake, I hope you're right. Come on, let's go below. The pantry and your compartments are down there. My first mate, Olly Rags, is up in the city right now so you won't meet her until later," Joey said and pushed Lana towards the staircase that led down.

"Olly Rags? I thought your mechanic's name was Dom Hofstaedter?" Lana said, turning around at the top of the staircase.

"Oh, is it. I just call her Olly 'cos her hands are always kinda dirty when we're at sea. The oil, eh?"

"Her hands? Her?! Is Dom Hofstaedter a woman, too?!" Lana said, spinning around so abruptly that she almost fell down the stairs.

"Jesus, watch it, lady!" Joey said and grabbed both Lana's shoulders with her strong hands. "My insurance agent will roast me over an open fire if you break your neck before we've even left the harbor! Man!"

Brushing off Joey's hands, Lana let out an impressive huff and walked down the stairs to get to the compartments. "Oh, I'm quite fine, thank you!"

Joey kept standing at the top of the stairs, staring at the feisty woman and scratching her hairline in a very puzzled fashion, trying to come up with reasons why the blonde woman was so temperamental. Not arriving at any conclusion whatsoever, she just shrugged and followed Lana down the stairs.
Rebecca just sighed deeply.

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Below, Lana moved up to the first compartment and pulled the curtain aside. What she saw made her chin begin to quiver - the tight quarters consisted of a bunk, a very small table and a metal closet that had been bolted onto the wall. The tiny porthole at the end of the cabin was open, allowing a few rays of sunshine to creep in, but other than that, it was very dark and gloomy.

"We've prepared two compartments for you like you requested, Miss Ferguson," Joey said, standing in the doorway.

"Oh… thank you… well… it's not really what I expected… more like what I feared… actually…" Lana said quietly.

"And why does it smell like cigar smoke in here?"

Slowly losing her patience with the spoilt New Yorker who seemed to change her mood faster than a cormorant could dive for a herring, Joey felt like one, giant question mark on the inside. Grumbling inwardly, she began to tap her fingers against the bulkhead.

"It smells of cigar smoke in here 'cos my cabin is just down the hall and I smoke cigars. Look, Miss Ferguson, it's not my problem that you didn't take a good look at the web site. We haven't hidden anything from you, hell, we've even spent more than three thousand bucks on gettin' the ship painted, for Cripe's sake!"

The moment the heated words left Joey’s mouth, she felt a pang of regret but knew that it was too late to do anything about it. "Great, you foulmouthed shmuck. Forty-five hundred bucks down the drain… now she's gonna high-tail it outta here…' she thought, scrunching up her face.

When Lana didn't shout at her but began to sob quietly instead, Joey's eyes popped wide open and she felt like the biggest heel on earth, unsure of what to do. "Uh…" she said, instinctively stretching out her arms.

Turning around, Lana flew into the Skipper's open arms and wrapped herself around the strong, Hawaiian-shirt-clad torso. "Oh, I just wanted a grand adventure but now I'm stuck on the USS Enterprise and nothing is like I expected it to be and you're not even a man and I can't… ohhhh!"

Joey held the sobbing woman tight, rubbing her hands up and down the petite back all the while staring wide-eyed at Rebecca who just shrugged in return.

"Okay… uh, Miss Ferguson…? Miss Ferguson?" Joey said quietly, almost like she was afraid the wrong word could set off a new round of sobbing.

"Y-yeah?"

"What's going on?"

Deciding to help the skipper out of the awkward situation, Rebecca moved in between Joey and Lana and took over the duties of holding the sobbing blonde. "Skip, I think I can explain," Rebecca said, pulling Lana's arm over her shoulder.

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Ten minutes later in the forward pantry, Lana blew her nose loudly in a napkin and then looked around for a trash can to throw it in.
"It's behind you, Miss Ferguson," Joey said, sitting the wrong way around on a chair.

"Oh, thank you," Lana snuffled and threw the piece of well-soaked paper in the can, looking - and sounding - like a blubbering mess.

"Miss Ferguson, I'm sorr..." Joey said, but soon came to a halt because she was slightly worried over the blonde's reaction. Taking a deep breath, she decided on trying a different approach. "Miss Ferguson, I can definitely understand wanting to break free from the suffocating conditions you're living under, but... sheesh... I wish you had gone someplace else to test your boundaries, 'cos, frankly, you had us all going at it like crazy to prepare for your arrival. I know that my first mate will be very upset if it was all for naught."

"I'm sorry," Lana snuffled, in dire need of a new napkin to blow her nose in.

Baring her teeth at the horrendous sight of two, sickly green lines sliding down the grown woman's upper lip, Joey hurriedly reached behind her, grabbed a full box of tissues and shoved it across the table. "You might wanna, uh..." she said, pointing at her own upper lip.

"I know..." Lana said between a sob and a snort.

"Uh, good."

Commotion up on the deck made Joey step off the chair and stick her head out of one of the portholes in the pantry.

Outside, Olly slid to a halt on her mountain bike, jumped off it and carried it up the gangway, not spotting Joey's face in the porthole until she was almost at the top. "Oh, hey... I couldn't find 'em anywhere! God only knows what has happened to them," the mechanic said and threw her hands in the air.

"I know exactly what's happened to them, Olly. They're here."

"Aw hell, and here I've toured half the Goddamned island to find 'em. Shit!" Olly said and let out a hoarse chuckle.

"Come on down and say hello. They're dyin' to meet ya," Joey said and moved back in.

Inside, Rebecca had helped Lana create a cold compress by pouring some cold water on a wad of tissues that she was holding against her eyes so they wouldn't turn puffy. "Was that your mechanic, Miss Swa... uh, I mean, Skip?"

"That's right. She'll be in shortly. Uh, meanwhile, how about a beer or something? I got a few cold ones...?"

"No, thank you. I don't drink beer, actually."

Staggered by that revelation, Joey pretended to sway gently in the non-existent breeze. "Wow, no shit? What, for religious reasons?"

"No, I just dislike the taste."

"Huh, imagine that. I love the taste of beer. Whatever," Joey said with a laugh.

Behind them, Olly stepped into the pantry, having changed into a squeaky clean, dark blue boiler suit that she had saved for just that occasion. It was too hot to zip it all the way up, so she had left the zipper head at one-quarter mast just below her belly button - revealing with striking clarity that she wasn't wearing a bra.
"Hi, everybody, I'm Dominique Hofstaedter, but everybody calls me… hey, what's going on here? Have you guys been fighting?" Olly said when she noticed the cold compress on Lana's face.

"Long story, Olly. This is Miss Rebecca Stern and Miss Lana Ferguson," Joey said, pointing at Rebecca and Lana.

"Okay…? Hello, pleased to meet ya," Olly said and put out her hand.

Just standing there like in a trance - or like an automaton - Rebecca had completely forgotten all her manners. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the long V she could see of the black woman's skin, nor from the ample chest and the way the two peaks tried to push their way through the fabric - nor from the mechanic's gorgeous face, for that matter.

"Wow, I haven't felt this scrutinized for years… great to know that I can still snare 'em in," Olly said to Joey when her outstretched hand was thoroughly ignored.

Laughing, Joey walked around the table and tapped Rebecca's shoulder.

Startled, Rebecca snapped out of it and blushed fire engine red when she realized that she had been most rude.

"Oh great, now she's blushing, too. You'd think they'd never seen a couple a' Sisters before, huh?" Joey said and let out a loud laugh.

Finally able to breathe again, Rebecca shook her head and stepped forward to shake hands with the sexy mechanic. "I'm… I'm… I'm… uh, terribly sorry, Miss Hofstaedter. I'm just… I was just…"

"I know. Doesn't bother me none," Olly said and swept her short hair away from her face with both hands in a gesture that opened up the boiler suit even more.

"Olly, that's just eeeevil," Joey said in a mock creepy voice. Clearing her throat, she turned back towards the two tourists and sat down at the table. "Listen, I've got an idea. Why don't you go back to your hotel and spend the night there? Then, tomorrow morning, one of you could come back and tell us what you've decided to do. If you want to go back to New York, I'll wire your money back to you, Miss Ferguson… it'll be a little while, but I'll send it, I give you my word. And if you choose to go on the trip, well… we'll set off when you get here. How's that?"

Putting away the cold compress, Lana nodded a couple of times, looking a little better. "That sounds like a very fair deal, Miss Swain."

"Hey, it's Joey or Skip. Like I said before, I won't answer to anything else," Joey said, tapping her knuckles on the melamine-plated table.

"All right… Joey. I appreciate it. Sorry I made your shirt wet before," Lana said and began to rise from her chair.

Leaning in, Olly put her face near Joey's and wiggled her eyebrows several times. "You've only known her for ten minutes and she's already made your shirt wet? That's gotta be some kind of record, Skip," she whispered.

"Shaddup, Olly. She cried on it."

"Awwww, you made her cry? What kind of Skipper are you, anyway?"

"Go fiddle with your engines, Olly!" Joey whispered back, nudging Olly in the ribs.
Walking around the table, Lana grabbed the stunned Rebecca and began to lead her out of the pantry. "No matter what, we'll be in touch. Thank you, Joey… and, uh, Olly," Lana said, nodding respectfully at the two tall, buff women.

"You're welcome. Come on, I'll help you get up," Olly said, guiding Lana and Rebecca out of the door and through the narrow hallway.

Back in the pantry, Joey took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling in her bones that if the fiery, unpredictable blonde accepted, there would be plenty of drama and histrionics on the trip.

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CHAPTER 3

As the bell on the nearby church tower struck one a.m., Lana silently opened the French doors of her hotel suite and stepped out onto the balcony only wearing a blue pajamas and a pair of bathing slippers - even though the temperature had dropped a great deal from the afternoon, the night was warm, leaving very little danger of her catching a cold.

Unable to sleep because of the many thoughts tumbling around in her mind, she began to study the slumbering city. Because it had been built on a hillside, she was able to see a large number of houses and shops from her vantage point; there were lights in some of the windows, but most were black. Faint traffic noises rose up from Long Bay Road, but they weren't intrusive at all.

In the far distance, she could see the rays of the moon reflected in the calm waters of Long Bay. She tried to look for Joey's boat, the Argo, but the harbor was too far away for her to see any details, apart from a row of brightly-colored dots that were gently bobbing left and right - the lanterns on top of the masts in the Yacht Haven.

Letting out a long sigh, Lana leaned forward and put her elbows on the balcony's metal railing. 'I wonder what Joey's doing now… Sleeping? Playing cards with Olly? Maybe she's in a tavern somewhere having a drink? Oh, why do I even care about her…'

The metal railing proved to be colder than anticipated and a brief shiver ran across Lana's body. Standing up straight, she rubbed her upper arms and went back inside, leaving the French doors wide open to let the gentle, warm breeze in.

Sitting down at the suite's desk, she began to toy with a fountain pen and a stack of paper to have something to do with her hands. 'I have no idea what I should do. Should we drop everything and go home? Should I swallow my pride and go on the treasure hunt? No, it's not even pride… God, I've been such a fool… I'm just a blind, naïve fool. Woefully unprepared and simply living an illusion, a frickin' Technicolor fantasy world. How could I have been so stupid that I actually believed that this was something that I could do? Little, naïve me who can't even make her own Goddamned breakfast! I'm thirty years old and I've never, ever had a serious girlfriend because I'm too frickin' scared of how my father would react when he found out!'

Jumping up from the chair, Lana began to pace back and forth in the suite. Reaching one end, she huffed loudly and spun around to go back the other way. 'But what should I do, dammit? Should we stay or should we go? No, I can't go… I just can't. I won't! If I chicken out now, if I run back to Daddy with my tail between my legs, I'm done, I'm frickin' finished… I'll never be more than an awkward, unnatural Daddy's Girl. The only future for me will be with Jason Connell and two-three-four kids of our own and… God, that's not what I want.'
Gradually slowing down, Lana buried her face in her hands and let out a long, heartfelt sigh. 'I have to do this… I have to do this if it kills me. I have to go on this trip. That's the only way I can grow as a human being. Oh, if only Joey had been a toothless, old hag with bad teeth and warts on her nose… but she's so sexy and beautiful I almost came when she first spoke to me.'

Snickering at that mental image, Lana shook her head and ran her fingers through her long, golden-blonde hair. Suddenly overcome by a very wide yawn, she took that as a sign that she had finished debating with herself - the result: she was going to go with Joey and Olly on the treasure hunt. If Rebecca Stern wanted to come, all the better, but she didn't want to force the secretary into doing anything she wasn't prepared to do.

"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead," she mumbled out loud, once again chuckling when she realized how excruciatingly, mind-numbingly nonsensical the whole deal had been until that point.

Yawning again, she quickly closed the French doors and went into the bedroom to get some rest.

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"And there you have it, Rebecca. I've decided to go on the treasure hunt. I'll of course accept whatever you decide on. It's totally up to you if you want to come with me or go home," Lana said the following morning as she put some strawberry jam on a slice of toast in the breakfast restaurant of the Long Bay Resort hotel.

"I need a moment to gather my thoughts, Miss Ferguson," Rebecca Stern said and leaned back in her chair, for once loosenning the top button of her white shirt. Picking up her glass of orange pulp, she slushed the thick fluid around again and again, hoping that the hypnotic sight would provide the answers for her. When it hadn't done so after a little while, she sighed and emptied the glass in three gulps. "I'm coming with you, Miss Ferguson."

"Listen, Rebecca, you don't have to go on the trip if you don't want to. Don't feel obliged to watch over me just because my Dad told you to. I could call him and-"

"That's not why, Miss Ferguson."

"No? Oh…" - suddenly feeling the Great Insight giving her a nudge in the side, Lana ducked her head down between her shoulders and let out a little snicker - "it's the mechanic, isn't it? It's Dom Hofstaedter?" she whispered.

"Yeah," Rebecca said dreamily, fiddling with the edge of the empty glass.

"Boy, this is just the weirdest thing… I mean, what are the odds, Rebecca? What are the odds that all four of us are… you know…"

"One in a billion, at least."

"If not more. Wow. Oh… you don't suppose…" - furrowing her brow and looking around to see if anyone was in earshot, Lana leaned in towards Rebecca to be able to speak very quietly. "Uh, you don't suppose she and Joey are… uh… together, do you?"

"To be honest, I don't know, Miss Ferguson. It didn't appear that way to me."

Drawing a pattern on the white tablecloth, Lana's complexion regained some of the reddish color it'd had the day before. "Oh. Good," she said halfway under her breath, concentrating hard on her fingers.

Rebecca scrunched up her face as she suddenly realized that the job she had been tasked with by Alfred Ferguson - to protect Lana from rowdy, horny sailors - was still as valid as it had been when he had given it to her. The only
thing that had changed was the basic anatomy of those rowdy, horny sailors. "Hmmm…" she said out loud, prompting Lana to look up and shoot her a puzzled look.

"What?"

"Nothing, Miss Ferguson. So, if we're going on a treasure hunt, it means that we'll be taking our travel bags. Good thing I didn't unpack them last night."

"Yeah… the swimsuits and the rest of the scuba gear. Hmmm, I wonder what kind of swimsuit Joey and Olly will be wearing once we find the first spot on the map…?"

"Oh, we better not go there right now, Miss Ferguson," Rebecca said hastily, patting the back of Lana's hand - but unfortunately, she was unable to stop her mind from drawing a few pretty pictures on its own accord, and soon, both women sitting at the breakfast table were sharing a few juvenile snickers.

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"Hey, Skip?" Olly said loudly, standing on the rear deck of the Argo sorting out a large coil of rope.

'Yeah?' Joey said from up on the bridge.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Olly glanced at the two women walking towards the Argo, each carrying a medium-sized travel bag, "We're about to have company."

"Yeah? Is it Everett?" Joey said, appearing in the doorway. When she caught a glimpse of the recognizable figures, she took off her sunglasses and cocked her head. "No, it's not Everett. Hmmm. Imagine that. You know, Olly, I didn't think they'd come."

"But come they have," Olly said and hung the coil of rope on a large hook.

"Yeah."

Putting her sunglasses back on, Joey snatched her floppy hat and jumped down from the bridge. "Quick, how do I look?" she said as she put on the hat.

The Hawaiian shirt Joey had put on was red-and-blue instead of blue-and-red, and the Bermuda shorts were pale blue instead of dark blue, but those were the only differences from her usual outfit. "Mmmmm, you're a whole new woman, Skip."

"Thanks, Olly. 'Preciate it."

Laughing out loud, Olly zipped up her boiler suit and went downstairs to go through the pre-start checklist for the engines.

After adjusting the row of buttons on her shirt to make it line up just right, Joey waved at the two tourists while she walked down the gangway. Meeting them halfway to the boat, Joey shook hands with the two women. "So… this doesn't look like a goodbye," she said, nodding at the travel bags.

"No, it's a hello, actually," Lana said, putting down her bag on the pier. "We've decided to go on the treasure hunt."
"Good." Taking a step back, Joey scrunched up her face when she realized that the older of the two women was still wearing the gun metal gray skirt suit and the white shirt, and that the shirt was still buttoned up to just below her chin. 'At least Lana is wearing a tank and shorts,' Joey thought, shaking her head slightly.

"Look, Miss Stern…" Joey continued, "I'm sorry, but it would be near-suicidal to wear that outfit once we're at sea where the sun is felt so much stronger. And even apart from that, my rules won't allow it, I'm afraid."

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Sw… uh, Skip. I have breezier clothes in my travel bag," Rebecca said, giving her bag a little shake.

"Oh. Okay. Well, with that settled, why don't we go aboard and head out to sea?" Joey said and picked up Lana's bag.

"You don't have to do that, Joey. I can carry my own bag," Lana said, trying to snatch the bag back from Joey's strong hand, but the Skip was insistent.

"Nope, I got it. Tourists first," Joey said with a broad smile, moving aside to let her two customers through.

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As Rebecca put her bag on her bunk and unzipped it, she suddenly felt someone observing her. Turning around, she found herself face to face with Olly who was standing in the doorway, holding the curtain aside.

"Hi," the mechanic said, wearing a sweet smile that immediately created an equally sweet tingle in the lower part of Rebecca's gut.

"Hi," Rebecca replied. Feeling a new blush coming on, she decided that the direct approach always worked best, and she went up to the mechanic and put out her hand. "We weren't properly introduced yesterday. I'm Rebecca Stern. How do you do."

"Hello, Rebecca. I'm Dom. Dominique Hofstaedter. But everyone calls me Olly Rags or just Olly," Olly said and gave the secretary a strong handshake.

"I'm sorry for being so blunt, but… Hofstaedter…?"

"Yeah, I know, right?" Olly said with a laugh. "There's a perfectly good explanation for it. My Dad's from the Netherlands by way of the Dutch Antilles. He used to be a sailor, and one day, he had shore leave where he met my mother and you're looking at the rest of the story."

"Oh… I see. Well, I guess it happens a lot… with sailors, I mean," Rebecca said with a gleam in her eye.

"Oh you better believe it does, Rebecca. And while we're on that kind of subject, I don't think you can wear… uh, that," Olly said and touched her own chest to allude to the white shirt and the gun metal gray suit.

"I know, I know. Miss Swain has already told me. I have some lighter clothes here… if I could only have two minutes of privacy, I could slip into something more comfortable," Rebecca said and dug into her travel bag. After a little probing, she found a white, long-sleeved t-shirt and a pair of shorts that she held up.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Olly said and pulled the curtain to. A split second later, she moved it aside again and peeked in. "Hey, Rebecca… d'ya think you'd like to share a drink with me a little later on? I don't know when we'll be heading back tonight, but even if we're back in port when the sun goes down, I guarantee it'll take your breath away. Like my mother says, you ain't lived until you've seen a Caribbean sunset."
"Well, uh…"

"Us old girls need to stick together. The Skip and your friend are nice kids, but they're just too young to know much about life… right? And I'm sure we could find something to talk about," Olly said, grinning broadly.

"Oh, well… I'd love to, Olly… but I don't drink beer. I hate the taste."

"No shit? I can't stand that bitter crap, either. I was thinking about a soda pop, actually," Olly said with a wink.

"Oh… in that case, you're definitely on," Rebecca said, matching the wink with one of her own.

"Neat. By the way, you need to come to the pantry in ten minutes' time. The Skip wants to tell you a few things before the departure."

"I'll be there, Olly."

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Ten minutes later, Rebecca stepped into the pantry where the others had already assembled and quickly found her place behind the melamine-plated table.

"All right," Joey said and stood up to her full height, assuming an air of authority that she hadn't had before. "There are some things you need to know before we set off. I call these things my ground rules. These ground rules were created to keep you safe, and thus, they're not up for debate at any time. Ground rule number one, this is my boat. I'm the Skipper and I have the final say about what is done, where it's done and for how long."

Everybody nodded.

"Two, once we're at sea, whenever you venture outside on the forward deck, the side paths or the rear deck, you are to wear a lifejacket at all times. It needn't be inflated, but you need to wear it. If you fall in, we might not be able to hear you at once," Joey said sternly.

"Uh, Skipper?" Lana said and raised her hand in the air.

"Yes, Lana?"

"I really hope that we won't fall in accidentally, but if one of us do, couldn't we just scream? Wouldn't you be able to hear that?"

"The engines are noisy, Lana. And the sharks are hungry."

"Oh, God…" Lana said, suddenly growing quite pale.

Nodding quietly, Joey seemed to lose track of her thoughts momentarily, but she was soon back on course. "Which leads me to ground rule number three… and I can see that you've paid attention, Rebecca. Three, while you're on this boat, you are to wear simple, light clothes and light shoes at all times. If you fall into the drink wearing heavy clothing, you'll get sucked down, lifejacket or not. In shorts, a t-shirt or a tank top, you'll at least have a fighting chance to stay afloat."

Lana turned her head to her right, looking at the strange sight of Rebecca Stern in something else than her trademark gun metal gray uniform. She had to admit that the secretary was actually an attractive woman, a facet to her that was completely lost once she donned the gray.
"Four, and I doubt this will be a problem… for once. I will not allow the consumption of alcohol on my boat while we're at sea. Anyone of you lovely ladies have a history of alcohol abuse I should know about?" Joey said, leaning forward to sniff the air.

When both Lana and Rebecca shook their heads, Joey let out a little laugh. "Didn't think so. All right, where was I…? Oh yeah, since this isn't a fishing trip, we can skip those rules. But not the ones relating to the diving. This is where I need to see your scuba certificates."

"They're in our neck purse, Miss Ferguson," Rebecca said, getting up to retrieve them, but Lana just waved at her and scooted away from the table.

In a flash, Lana returned and handed the Skipper the two documents. "Here they are, Joey. There shouldn't be anything wrong with them."

"Thanks, Lana. Okay… hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm… oh, you've got pretty high marks in underwater perception, that's good, Lana. Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm… okay, they're up to scratch," Joey said and handed the documents back to Lana. "Still, you're rookies. Ground rule number five, under no circumstances are you to perform a dive without me being present. I know a thing or two about the world down there, you don't. I'm sailing out with two breathing guests, I'd like to go back with two breathing guests, not one tied to the rear deck wrapped in plastic and one weeping over the friend she lost. You got that?"

Shocked over the direct language - but both understanding the necessity - Lana and Rebecca nodded as one.

"Good. Since you're not experienced divers, I need to check your gear before each and every dive. I know how easy it is to go into a panic down there…"

Once again, Joey seemed to zone out, and Lana made a mental note to ask the Skipper or Olly what that was all about.

Snapping out of her dark thoughts, Joey stood up straight and clapped her hands together. "Anyway. Olly, do you have anything to add?"

"No, Skip," the mechanic said.

"Right. We leave in half an hour. Ladies, you are welcome on the bridge while we sail out of the harbor… just don't fiddle with any knobs, okay?"

The small flash of humor was an effective tension-breaker, and Lana and Rebecca both let out matching nervous laughs while they moved away from the table to finish their preparations.

As Lana walked past her, Joey put a gentle hand on the tourist's elbow. "Lana, I need to take a look at the so-called genuine treasure map before we take off. I'm only planning to do a practice dive today, but I need to know exactly what it is we're aiming for."

"Of course, Skip. I have it in my bag," Lana said, secretly enjoying the feel of Joey's callused hand on her bare arm.

"All clear, Skip!" Olly shouted as she jumped back onboard the Argo after having released all four moorings. With an almighty pull, she retracted the gangway and stowed it vertically on six hooks on the side of the bridge.

"Number two is running a little rough, Olly!" Joey shouted back from her position on the bridge.
"I'm on it," Olly said, opened a hatch on the rear deck and disappeared down a ladder that would take her to the engine bay. A moment later, the sounds of the twin Napier Deltics matched up, and the engine note changed to a potent, throaty rumble.

"Wow, this really is the USS Enterprise," Lana said to Rebecca, standing in a corner of the bridge and staring wide-eyed at the hectic activity.

"Yeah, no kidding…"

After pulling a cover off an old-fashioned, brass speaking tube, Joey leaned in and said, "Olly?"

'All set, Skip. It was just a loose plug.'

"Right. Pulling out," Joey said and set the engine room telegraph to 'All ahead, slow.' Reaching up above her, Joey pulled the cord for the fanfare horns, making them toot once to let the other vessels know that another ship entered the waters.

'All ahead slow, aye, Skip!' Olly said from the engine bay.

Joey nodded and began to turn the wheel to port to clear the pier. Soon, the Argo slid away from the wooden pier and into the harbor with the engines burbling merrily, clearly eager to deliver their maximum punch as soon as it was called on them.

"Oh my flippin' God, that was fun!" Lana exclaimed, holding her hands in the air.

"This can't be your first time at sea, Lana?" Joey said and made a slight course correction, aiming at the mouth of the harbor and the vast ocean beyond.

"I've only ever tried the small passenger ferries that sail on the Hudson! This is totally different!"

"Well, the basic concept is the same," Joey said with a chuckle. Clearing her throat, she leaned down towards the speaking tube. "What's cookin', Olly?"

'Everything's lookin' pretty good, Skip. It was just a hiccup. We're good to go.'

"Excellent. Once we've cleared the buoys, you can come up for air."

'Thanks, Skip.'

Turning around, Joey offered her two passengers a wide grin. "It was just a hiccup. It's gonna be a couple of hours before we get to the first spot. I think you should go below and kick back some. Diving is hard work and it can really sap your strength if you're not rested. I'll whistle for ya if something exciting happens en route."

"Oh, that's a good idea. I need something to drink, anyway," Rebecca said and moved towards the small flight of stairs that led to the cabins.

Lana kept hanging around, almost like she wanted to say something to the skipper, but in the end, she just smiled and followed Rebecca below deck.

-#-#-#-
Nearly two hours fifteen minutes later a few miles off the coast of the South-Eastern part of St. Thomas, Joey gradually reduced the speed which eventually brought the Argo to a halt.

As the boat bobbed up and down on the gentle, sky blue waves, Joey took her binoculars and swept the entire horizon looking for other ships - and shark fins.

Down below, Lana felt the engines gradually slow down and then come to a full stop. Letting out a whoop, she swung her legs over the side of her bunk, hurriedly put on a pair of flip-flops and grabbed her travel bag.

Unzipping it at once, she took her scuba gear and laid it out on the small table. "Swimsuit, goggles, swim fins, snorkel, regulator, pressure gauge, lead weights… God, I hope the tanks aren't too heavy… back in the class, I could hardly move once they were strapped to my back… I better ask first."

Before changing into her swimsuit, Lana tried to listen for Joey or Olly so she wouldn't get caught with her cheeks in a breeze, but could only hear Rebecca go through the same procedures she had just completed. "Rebecca, have you changed yet?"

'Almost there, Miss Ferguson!'

"Ummm, once you're fully dressed, would you mind standing guard at my curtain? I… uh…"

'Sure thing, Miss Ferguson. I'll be there in a minute."

"Great, thanks," Lana said and held up her swimsuit. Looking at it for the first time since she had received the parcel from the online retailer she had bought it from, she began to feel that it was a bit too much - or rather, too little. Thinking back, she wasn't sure she had *ever* worn anything quite that revealing.

Suddenly wishing she had followed her senses instead of what the fashion magazines said, Lana bit her cheek as she took a closer look at the emerald green swimsuit. "Oh, God… was this such a good idea?" she mumbled, staring at the outfit that the advertisement had promised would feel like a second skin.

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At the same time, Olly came up to the bridge, wiping her hands on an oily rag. "Gauges all lookin' good now, Skip. Don't know what the hell that hiccup was. Never seen anything like it, and it didn't return," she said with a shrug.

Shrugging, Joey waved her hand in a dismissive fashion. "Ah, they're just getting old. I mean, they're even older than you. They'll fall to pieces sooner or later."

"If we didn't have company, you'd already be squealin' by now, Skip," Olly said quietly, adding a sly, little wink.

"Promises, promises," Joey said and lit a cigar. Blowing out a cloud of smoke, she turned towards the stairs to the cabins. "It's funny, though. I woulda thought our guests would've been up he-" - she never finished the sentence, because at that exact moment, Lana climbed the stairs and entered the bridge wearing the most form-fitting swimsuit the Skipper had ever seen.

Even Olly stared wide-eyed at the emerald green piece of fabric that hugged the blonde's body so tightly that only the color gave away that she wasn't naked.

"I know… you don't have to say a word," Lana squeaked, feeling the most embarrassed she'd ever been in her entire life. She tried to fold her arms across her chest but that left another part of her anatomy clearly visible. "I… oh, God," she squeaked, moving a hand down to have her swim fins cover her crotch.
"Well, it's, uh… kinda… almost not there at all," Olly said with a saucy grin.

Joey just began to puff deeply on her cigar, thinking that the blonde had one of the top five sexiest bodies she had ever witnessed in real life. 'Hell, make that top three!' she thought after giving the blonde's firm bosom, toned stomach and shapely legs an extra check.

A few seconds later, Rebecca tapped her knuckles on the doorjamb and peeked into the bridge, seemingly not too keen on flashing her own swimsuit. "Have you all dropped dead yet? I hope you have 'cos I'm… uh… coming. So to speak," she said, slowly climbing the stairs.

Comically, Rebecca was wearing a gun metal gray swimsuit in a very nice and somewhat old-fashioned cut that wasn't anywhere near as revealing as Lana's, but that still showed that she was very much a woman.

"Why Rebecca Stern, you look fabulous," Olly said, pretending to swoon.

"No I don't. My boobs are sagging and I have a disgusting roll of fat on my gut and my butt," Rebecca mumbled, not wanting to look either of the other women in the eye.

Grunting, Olly moved over to the embarrassed woman and gave her a really close inspection. "Like I said, Rebecca… you look fabulous," Olly said once she had given Rebecca a thorough check from all angles.

"I think so, too, Rebecca," Lana said, rubbing the secretary's arm.

"Thanks, everybody… but I know I don't," Rebecca mumbled.

From her vantage point at the other side of the bridge, Joey let out a large plume of cigar smoke and a small chuckle. "Hell, personally I think we all look fabulous. Right, Olly, wouldya mind dragging out the tanks? I'll go change and then we'll take our first plunge into the wonderfully wet world below. Okay?"

"Sure thing, Skip," Olly said and saluted Joey. On her way past Rebecca, Olly briefly leaned in and gave the other woman a quick peck on the cheek. "You turn me on," she growled for Rebecca's ears only, adding to the secretary's acute embarrassment.

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A few minutes later, Lana and Rebecca, sitting on a small bench on the rear deck, tested their equipment and got ready to put it on while Olly released the locks and swung the rear gate open to reveal a diving platform.

"All right, let me see your gear," Joey said, climbing down the stairs.

Looking up from her preparations, Lana immediately choked on some saliva when she saw what the Skipper was wearing - instead of the tacky Hawaiian shirt and the loud Bermuda shorts, she was wearing a black Neoprene swimsuit with long, cobalt blue lightning bolts that stretched down from her shoulders, over her bosom and all the way down to her pubic bone, seemingly pointing directly at her center.

Choking, hacking, coughing and spluttering, Lana was forced to lean forward, completely red in the face from the coughing attack that didn't come to an end until Rebecca pounded her fist rhythmically into Lana's back.

Joey, smirking broadly, knelt down in front of the red-faced Lana and checked her pulse, just to be on the safe side. "Mmmmm, yeah, kinda fast but you're still with us. So, your equipment…?"

"It's… all… yours…" Lana croaked, pointing at her gear.
"Ready?" Joey barked from the end of the rear deck, looking sternly at the two rookies. When she got two identical nods from Lana and Rebecca, she pointed at her mechanic. "Olly, once we're in, hoist the diver flag, okay?"

"Like always, Skip," Olly said, holding a neatly folded Diver Down flag.

"And here we go," Joey said and let herself fall backwards into the ocean. She resurfaced a split second later, treading water while she waited for her guests to follow her. "Rebecca!" she said in a voice muffled by the breathing mask.

Gulping loudly, Rebecca let herself fall backwards, letting out a wild squeal when the unusual motion made its presence felt in her stomach.

Standing up, Lana moved over to the far end of the rear deck and turned around. When she heard the Skipper yell her name, she crouched down and fell backwards.

The ocean was warmer than she had expected - and much, much warmer than the swimming pool she had practiced in for her certificate - but it was still an extreme shock to her system. At first, the feeling of water over her head and the lack of solid ground under her feet meant that she felt like she was falling to her death, and she instinctively drew several very deep breaths.

Once the first shock had passed, she found herself bobbing back to the surface, helped there by a pair of strong hands. Staring around in a wide-eyed daze, she soon spotted Joey smirking at her and asking her a question in sign language; an okay-sign that she formed with her thumb and index finger.

Sheepishly, Lana nodded a few times and returned the okay. It didn't take her long to feel natural in the water, and she was surprised to feel that the modern equipment used on the Argo weighed so little she could hardly feel it on her back.

Once Joey had made sure her two rookies were settled down and ready for more, she raised her hand in the air to make them pay attention. When they were both staring at her, she made a thumbs-down gesture with her hand and flipped around in the water, going downstairs.

Lana - wanting to perform the flip just as graciously as the experienced diver - did her best, but ended up looking like a pregnant elephant losing her footing in a mudslide.

Rebecca fared better and she earned herself a nod and an okay-sign from Joey when they met a short while later.

Together, the three divers slowly descended to the sandy bottom of the sea. The point Joey had chosen to do the first practice dive was close to the coast, and the ocean floor was less than thirty feet below the surface.

Once they made it there, Joey stayed back but kept a very close eye on the two rookies as they frolicked in the clear water. It was obvious that they weren't always aware of their surroundings, and when Rebecca was suddenly close to having her air line snag on a curved rock, Joey thrust her hand up in a stop-sign.

Snapping back to reality, Lana and Rebecca both stopped playing around and looked at Joey who immediately swam close to Rebecca and pointed at the rock.

Understanding the danger, Rebecca nodded and swam away from the small spot, prompting Joey to send her an okay-sign.
Lana began to observe the ocean floor, seeing lots of little rocks and other protrusions she hadn't seen before. Turning around, she began to skim along the surface of the floor in a large arc that would eventually take her back to Joey and Rebecca.

Halfway around the arc, she suddenly found herself sharing the space with a large shoal of brightly colored fish. The magical sight overwhelmed her so badly that she squealed into the mouthpiece, creating a string of bubbles that spooked the fish into dispersing in an almighty hurry.

A split second later, the large rock on the ocean floor she had used as a pointer to find back to the others began to shift in a way that made her want to rub her eyes.

As the manta ray raised itself from the ground, it kicked off the sand it had used to disguise itself and took off, heading away from Lana and into the sea beyond her range. 'Oh boy! It's probably upset with me 'cos I frightened off its lunch!' she thought, giggling through her mouthpiece.

Looking back up, Lana realized that she had drifted too far away from Joey and Rebecca and that she needed to get back at once. 'If there's one thing I want to avoid, it's to have Joey mad with me. I'll bet she has a vocabulary that could strip the paint off an aircraft carrier…'

Lana, remembering the specifics from her scuba course, took off back towards the other two divers by using her legs and swim fins to get a flying start from her position near the ocean floor. Half a minute later, Lana reached Joey who was looking at something Rebecca had found under a rock.

When the three divers assembled deep under the Argo, Joey pointed to her oxygen gauge on her arm, prompting Lana and Rebecca to do the same.

Startled to see that she only had twenty-five percent left of her air, Lana beat her hands on her chest to indicate to Joey that she had a low air supply.

Nodding, Joey tapped both Lana and Rebecca on their arms and held her hand in a thumbs-up sign that indicated that they should start the ascent.

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Two minutes later, Olly put out her hand and helped Lana up on the rear deck of the Argo. Once the blonde diver was sitting on the warm planks, she took off her mask and began to crawl out of the rigging for the tank.

Breathing unrestricted for the first time in half an hour, she closed her eyes and allowed the rays of the sun to put some heat into her body that had been chilled more than she had expected.

When Rebecca broke through the surface a short while later, she had a bit of trouble getting up on the rear deck, but a good pull by Olly and an equally good push by Joey eventually sent her up on the boat.

As she took off her mask and her tank, she let out such a wildly ecstatic whoop that the other women couldn't help but laugh at her enthusiasm.

"I hope that was from enjoying the experience and not because you have a crab in your swimsuit, Rebecca," Joey said as she pulled herself up on the rear deck with no effort at all.

Dragging off her tank, Rebecca clambered to her feet and began to shake Joey's hand, pumping it up and down like the arm of a well. "Oh, God! That was the most awesome thing I've ever done… ever! I… was… it was… oh, God!"
"I know exactly what you mean, Rebecca," Joey said, pulling her hand back from Rebecca's slippery grip before her shoulder would pop out of joint.

"Miss Ferguson, don't you think that was awesome? God, I can't even describe it!" Rebecca said, spinning around to find someone else to connect with.

Moving her wet hair back from her face, Lana laughed out loud at the secretary's antics and joined her in an impromptu victory dance, feeling strangely thankful to her father for insisting that Rebecca came along on the trip. If he hadn't, she would never have seen the other side of the otherwise so buttoned-up woman - the human underneath the gun metal gray uniform.

After Olly had pulled down the Diver Down flag from the mast, she folded it neatly and stowed it in a corner of the rear deck. "Awww, first timers… ain't it cute?" she said, wrapping an arm around Joey's wetsuit-clad shoulders.

"Yeah. Is the water ready, Olly?"

"Yep. I have the showers rigged up on the forward deck. Two fifty gallon drums should be enough for all of you."

"Okay. Hey, ladies… listen up, please. Hello!" Joey said, emphasizing the last word so strongly that Rebecca and Lana once again stopped playing around.

"Thanks," Joey said once she could hear herself think. "We've set up a shower on the forward deck. I strongly suggest you use it."

"A sh… a shower? Out in the open?" Lana said, suddenly remembering that she was wearing next to nothing in the presence of others. Taking her fins, she placed them against her front so she wouldn't feel so exposed.

"Yeah. We need to wash our suits and ourselves to get the salt and the bacteria off our bodies."

"Uh, Skip… I mean, can't we… couldn't we… uh, do it a little later… or, uh, below deck?" Lana said, biting her lips.

"I'm guessing your instructor at the scuba class was a man, right?" Joey said, taking off her swim fins.

"Yes… but what's that got to do with anything?"

"It's not as important for men, but because we gals are a bit more open to the world, if ya catch my drift, we can develop a really nasty urinary tract infection if we don't get cleaned up pretty quickly."

"Oh… ewwww," Lana said, instinctively crossing her legs.

"Hence the shower. And no, we can't do it below 'cos we need too much water. There aren't any ships in the vicinity, Lana. Nobody can see you. I know public nudity is a big no-no for you big city girls, but the alternative is quite awful. Trust me, I know exactly what I'm talking about."

Gulping audibly, Lana and Rebecca looked at each other. It only took them two seconds to agree to showering in public.

"I'm going first," they both said as one.

"And I'll go last," Joey said, chuckling at the horrified look on the faces of her two guests.
"Supper's ready! Come and get some!" Joey shouted into the narrow hallway, balancing a steaming tuna and pasta casserole over to the fully set table.

In her cabin, Lana swung her legs over the side of the bunk and scratched her itchy hair. When she realized that she had slept for three straight hours instead of the fifteen-minute power nap she had planned, she shot to her feet, put on her flip-flops and hurried into the small bathroom to relieve herself of the large amount of water she'd consumed after her dive.

A few minutes later, she stepped into the pantry that had been converted into a miniature dining hall. Four plates, four glasses and four cans of soda had been put on the small table, creating a very cozy - but fairly cramped - atmosphere. Rebecca had placed herself next to Olly, leaving a space open for Lana next to the Skipper.

"You better hurry if you want some of my world famous tuna casserole, Lana," Joey said and scooped up a large spoonful of the deliciously smelling food.

Lana's stomach replied for her by growling loudly, something that made the others raise their glasses and salute her.

"Oh… if I had known we'd be five, I'd have set another plate," Joey said, winking at the embarrassed Lana before taking a sip from her Coke.

"Ha, ha. I'm just hungry," Lana said and sat down next to Joey. "Diving makes one hungry, you know."

"Oh, I know. Do you want me to open your can for you?"

Looking at the Skipper to see if she was trying to mess around with her, Lana was surprised to find that Joey's face was nothing but sincere. "Uh… no, I got it. But thank you, Joey," she said, looking at the can of Coke. "Oh, I know I'm going to be really annoying now, but you wouldn't happen to have a Diet Coke, would you?"

"Sure," Joey said, took the Classic Coke and inched over to the refrigerator. Moments later, she put a Diet Coke down on the table. "Here ya go."

"Oh, thanks. I always drink Diet Coke," Lana said as she cracked open the can and poured the sticky brown liquid into her glass.

"Noted for future reference," Joey said with a broad grin before she went to work on her pile of tuna and pasta casserole.

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"Yeah… okay. Looks like we were five at the table, anyhow," Joey said, staring into the completely empty pot less than fifteen minutes later. "I didn't even get a second helping of my own casserole!"

"Uh… sorry. That was me," Lana said, pushing away her empty plate.
Chuckling, Rebecca emptied her glass and pushed it into the center of the table. "It's so unfair. I don't know where you put it all, Miss Ferguson. Look at me, I can't even walk past a pizza parlor or a bakery without gaining five pounds."

"Rebecca, like I told you more than once… hell, more than twice," Olly said, leaning in towards her bench-mate. "You look fantastic."

"Thanks, Olly, but I know I'm too fat," Rebecca said, toying with her glass.

"Skipper, we have grievances," Olly said somberly to Joey. "We need a vote. All those who think Rebecca Stern is too fat say aye."

When the only sound heard was the waves gently slapping against the hull, Olly tapped her knuckles on the melamine-plated table and leaned in towards the secretary. "The vote is in. You're not too fat. Hell, you're not even fat at all, Rebecca. You're round, sure, but round ain't fat. I'm round, too… and lemme tell you, round girls can go *all* night. Not like those skinny kittens over there who have to catch a breather now and then," Olly whispered huskily, pointing her thumb at Lana and Joey.

Predictably, Rebecca blushed fire engine red and snickered in an embarrassed fashion, but didn't dare look up at any of the others.

Lana felt a blush begin to sting her own cheeks, and it didn't get any better when she happened to look up and lock eyes with Joey, who happened to look at her at the exact same time.

Pushing her chair back to get away from the saucy air that had suddenly invaded their supper, Joey took the plates and got up. "And with that out of the way, how about we discussed what tomorrow may bring?"

"Have you had time to look at my treasure map while I was sleeping, Joey?" Lana said, reaching over the table and giving Rebecca's hand a little squeeze to show her support.

Clearing the table of the last items, Joey put them in the small sink next to the refrigerator. "Yes, I have, actually," she said as she sat back down at the table. "I've seen a lot of fakes over the years, but I have to admit that it looks… well… less like a fake than I had anticipated."

"Ummm… in English, please…?"

"Well, I… hmmm. There's a chance it could be real."

At that piece of very unexpected news, Lana's eyes popped wide open and she let out a cross between a squeal and a surprised snort. "Oh… wow!" she said, practically letting her jaw drop down on the tabletop.

"Mmmm-yeah. Do you know where your father bought it?"

"No…?"

"Hmmm. Lana, would you mind getting it? I need to point out the things I've discovered."

"Back in a flash!" Lana said and hurried away from the table.
A scant minute later, Lana carefully unfurled the ancient scroll and put salt and pepper shakers and two glasses on the four corners to hold them down.

"All right, this is the route we took today," Joey said, moving her index finger from the central part of the island where the port of Charlotte Amalie was, round the south-eastern tip and up the east coast. "And this is our current position," she continued, tapping her finger down on the map at a spot just east of St. Thomas.

"Uh-huh?" Lana said, moving closer so she could see better. Doing so made her arm brush against Joey's right breast, forcing her to gulp and pull back in an almighty hurry. "Oops, pardon me," she said, trying to act as nonchalantly as possible.

Joey just grinned and kept going. "Uh, yeah. Now, as you can see, someone has written something in an illegible hand and there's an arrow there as well, pointing at a part of the sea that I happen to know hides one of the largest sandbanks in the area."

"A sandbank?" Rebecca said, scrunching up her face. "Isn't that dangerous?"

Smiling, Joey leaned back and put her hands on her hips. "To the huge sailing ships they used back then, sure, but not to the modern flat-bottomed boats like the Argo. Even so, we can't get too close, but we can swim in. None whatsoever. The depth is roughly fifteen to twenty feet so it'll be even shallower than your practice dive."

"Where is it, Joey?" Lana said, trying to keep her arms closer to her body so she could get closer to the map without bumping into anything embarrassing.

"Eight miles further north."

"Oh! But then we could-"

"Not today, Lana."

Lana briefly opened her mouth to fight for her idea to carry on the expedition instead of going back to port, but then remembered Ground Rule number one - it's Joey's boat and she has the final word. "But we will return tomorrow, right?" she said, putting her fingers across her lips.

"Oh, sure," Joey said, realizing cheerily that Lana had remembered what she'd been told, even if it had almost killed her to keep quiet. "Of course, there's no guarantee that we'll find anything at all there."

"Oh, I'm aware of that. But it's a treasure hunt, after all," Lana said, nodding thoughtfully.

Closing the scroll, Joey handed it back to Lana who immediately put it into the cylindrical case she had it stored in. "Right," Joey said and clapped her hands together. "The sun will set in half an hour so nothing more will happen today. We're going back to Charlotte Amalie now. Ladies," she said, taking a little bow to show that the meeting was over.

"Oh!" Rebecca said and put her hand in the air.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for supper, it was delicious. Should we have some form of kitchen duty plan? If I'm up first, I wouldn't mind doing the dishes tonight."
Olly shook her head vigorously and stepped in to put an arm on Rebecca's shoulders. "No dishes for you, Rebecca. Once we get going, you're coming with me up on the top of the bridge. We're gonna get two deck chairs and then we'll watch the Caribbean sunset together as we cruise into the harbor... and dishwasher hands don't come into the picture."

"But."

"End of discussion. Skip?"

Grinning broadly, Joey nodded and moved her hands in a gesture that said, 'off you go, lovebirds.' "I'll do the dishes myself."

"We'll do the dishes," Lana said, matching the Skipper's grin with one of her own.

Zipping her boiler suit a bit further down to show just a bit more skin, Olly let out a throaty chuckle and wiggled her eyebrows. "Great...! I'll be downstairs to go through the pre-start checklist. Meet you up top in a little while, Rebecca," Olly said and stole a kiss from the secretary's cheek.

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Twenty minutes later, Rebecca quickly said Hi to Joey and Lana as she climbed up past the bridge on her way to the top. "I'm wearing my lifejacket, Skip!" she said, smiling shyly.

"I noticed," Joey said with a grin, busy steering the Argo back to port.

Once Rebecca made it to the top, she was amazed to find that it was completely flat and much larger than it appeared from below. The four antennas were bent backwards from the headwind which made them send out an otherworldly, but strangely harmonic, whistling song, and in the middle of it all, Olly had put up two deck chairs and a small cooler box.

Feeling her insides begin to tingle in a warm, delightful fashion, Rebecca couldn't stop an excited little giggle from escaping her lips, and she decided to pinch her arm just to see if she was dreaming - she wasn't.

At first, she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to keep her balance on the roof of the bridge, but she soon discovered that it wasn't too bad. 'I wouldn't want to be up here in a storm, though,' she thought as she moved over to the nearest deck chair.

Sitting down, she realized that Olly had put the cooler box between the deck chairs, but in a flurry of bravery, she reached down, removed the box and pulled the other chair closer to hers so they were up close and personal.

Two minutes later, Olly appeared on the roof, wearing her trademark dark blue boiler suit. When she noticed that Rebecca had moved the deck chairs together, she broke out in a foxy grin that didn't even fade when she spotted the life jacket.

"Hi," Olly said huskily, sitting down next to the secretary.

"Hi."

"Want something to drink?"

"Not right now, thanks."
"Okay."

On the western horizon, the sun slowly began to set, creating a breathtaking array of colors across the sky and the few, scattered clouds and jet contrails. One cloud in particular was lit up and transformed into a bright splash of deep purple against the golden sky.

"Wow, look at that!" Rebecca said and pointed at the cloud. "You were right about the Caribbean sunset… it's gorgeous!"

"Mmmm," Olly said, looking squarely at Rebecca's profile instead of at the sunset.

When Rebecca felt Olly's eyes on her, she looked to her left and locked eyes with the mechanic. A sense of warmth and happiness bubbled up inside her that eventually turned into a broad, if slightly shy, smile.

"There are plenty of gorgeous things down here, Rebecca… and I'm looking at the very best part of it," Olly husked, seeking out Rebecca's hand.

Rebecca didn't need much persuasion to take Olly's hand and give it a little squeeze. Pulling their entwined hands closer, she let them rest on her stomach and ran her free hand up and down Olly's strong arm, just to show that she was enjoying the moment.

Suddenly all the stars aligned right, and as a result, the two women moved as one. Reaching over at the same time, they went in deep for a kiss that started fairly chaste but that soon grew to something much more.

When their lips touched, a good-sized jolt went through Rebecca's system that made all her nerve ends stand on edge and cry out for more - a lot more - but even as her body reacted to the sweet touch, her mind raised a bright red warning flag. "Dominique…" she whispered as she pulled back from the mechanic's luscious lips, "I don't want to be a simple holiday catch. Let's take it slowly."

"Oh, Rebecca… you wouldn't be," Olly whispered back, running her fingers down the side of Rebecca's face and onto her throat.

"Still… I…"

"I know. Let's just enjoy the sunset. Okay?" Olly said, kissing the tip of Rebecca's nose before she went back to her own deck chair.

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"They're so quiet. What do you suppose they're doing up there, Joey?" Lana said, sitting in Joey's Captain's chair.

Looking at her guest, Joey settled for letting out a hoarse little laugh that didn't leave room for misinterpretation.

"Oh… I… oh."

Biting her fingernails, Lana briefly looked at the Skipper and then out into the dusk. 'Oh, Lana Ferguson, you big chicken… why don't you ask Joey if she has any plans for tonight…? Come on, come on, you miserable coward!'

Lana turned back to Joey, thinking that she had the question all lined up, but just as she opened her mouth to ask, her courage flew out of her and she hurriedly closed her mouth again. A couple of heartbeats later, she got up from the chair and pretended to yawn. "Oh, I think I'll go below and catch some shuteye."
"That's a good idea, Lana. You'll know when we dock," Joey said, making a small course correction.

"Mmmm," Lana said as she went down the stairs to the cabins, mentally whacking herself over the head for her weak backbone.

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After knocking three times on the metal door post without getting a response, Joey quietly pulled aside the curtain to Lana's cabin and peeked in.

When she spotted Lana flat on her back on her bunk, mouth agape in slumber, she let out a little chuckle and moved into the cabin.

The Skipper's presence alone was enough to stir Lana from her nap, and she soon sat up and wiped the sand out of her eyes. "Oh… I dozed off… again. What is it with me and sleeping on this boat? I never sleep this much back home…"

"It's either the sea air or the gentle rolling of the waves… works every time. Listen… uh, Lana… I was thinking," Joey said, sitting down next to Lana's bare legs. "Would you, uh… be interested in going out tonight…?"

Lana instantly cocked her head, furrowed her brow and narrowed her eyes, not quite believing her ears. 'What a minute… what did she just ask me? Did she just ask me what I thought she asked me? Nah, there must be some kind of misunderstanding…'

Joey - feeling like she'd just had her earlobe tweaked - took Lana's facial expression entirely the wrong way and quickly moved up from the bunk so she wouldn't be seen to be intruding. "Oh, okay, I can see you're not. Well, anyway, I just wanted to ask-"

"Hold it, hold it, hold it," Lana said and raised both hands in the air. "I've just been sleeping… my brain is only running at one-third of its regular speed right now. Would you please run that by me again?"

Taking a deep breath, Joey let it out slowly, making a face as she did so. "Uh, Olly and I are going up to a tavern called The Bait and Spear and we were… no, actually, I was wondering if you'd want to come along… or something," the Skipper said, thrusting her fists so far down the pockets of her shorts that she was able to touch the lower seams with her index fingers.

"Ohhh. Yes, please," Lana said with a smile.

"Goodie," Joey said, returning the smile. 'Aw hell, I just morphed into a schoolgirl there, didn't I? Man, that hasn't happened to me in decades. But this little cutie-pie is different… so incredibly, mind-blowingly different from the other chicas I've spent time with recently that it's almost a night and day experience… damn! The next thing you know, you'll be buying her flowers and shit, ya big lug!'

Getting up, Lana yawned and ran a hand through her hair that still itched like crazy. Growling, she began to scratch her scalp, but it didn't really help.

"Looks like your scalp doesn't like the salt… perhaps you'll need to wear a hood tomorrow, Lana," Joey said, digging into the breast pocket of her Hawaiian shirt to find a cigar.

"Could be… I don't have one, though."
"Oh, we've got a couple in our supplies. We should have one that fits ya," Joey said and flipped open her trusty, old Zippo to get ready to light up.

"Skip, are you going to smoke that?"

"That's the plan, yeah," Joey said, making the cigar bob up and down in her mouth.

"If I asked you really, really nicely, would you put it away?" Lana said and sent the Skipper a pointed - but not unfriendly - look.

Clicking the Zippo shut, Joey chewed on the tip of the cigar a couple of times but then put it back into her breast pocket.

"Thanks, Joey. I'm not good with smoke of any kind."

"I am," Joey said with a shrug. "Ah, what the hell. I'll live. So, Olly is at the helm at the moment… I guess we'll be back at the pier in about ten-fifteen minutes. Do you want to go back to your hotel to freshen up first, or…?"

"No, I think I'm good. Yep, definitely good," Lana said, pretending to sniff her armpits.

Joey, thinking that Lana couldn't possibly smell bad even after a day working in a pigsty, grinned broadly and reached out to thump the blonde's shoulder. "That's great, Lana. Hey, coming along worked out pretty well, didn't it? I'm certainly glad you didn't bail on us. You and Rebecca are really fast learners… it's been a load of fun, in my opinion."

"Yeah… yeah, it has, Skip," Lana said and cocked her head again, trying to read the intentions of the tall, blue-eyed beauty. She almost opened her mouth to ask Joey straight out if the plans of the evening included going out on a real date, but her own courage abandoned her all over again right at the least opportune moment.

Feeling scorched by the intensity of the Irish green eyes, Joey turned around, moved the curtain aside and went into the corridor to get away from them before she did anything stupid - like kissing Lana senseless. "Yeah, uh… and let me tell you, that's not always the case when it comes to my customers. Some of them… Jeez! Oh, uh… I better go. See ya in a little while, Lana."

"See ya, Skip," Lana said, scratching her hair. 'Okay, what on Earth was that all about…?' she thought when the curtain fluttered down.

Out in the corridor, Joey looked towards the heavens for guidance. A few seconds later, she rolled her eyes repeatedly and went over to the staircase. 'What the flying flip just happened there…?' she thought as she ascended the stairs to get back to the bridge.

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An hour later, the four women turned right off the well-lit Long Bay Road and into a sinister, semi-dark side street that held a faint whiff of urine and other waste.

The street was the personification of what Rebecca had been worried about when she had thought about protecting Lana from rowdy, horny sailors, and she looked nervously over her shoulder at the times where they walked in the shadows between the sparse light posts.
Lana, sharing every bit of Rebecca's nervousness, sought out the secretary's hand in the semi-darkness and was relieved to feel her strong grip. Gulping loudly, she moved to her right so she was closer to Rebecca in case anything went wrong.

As the unwritten regulations dictated, Joey had taken the point and she strode up the street like she had been there a hundred times. Engaged in an animated - and somewhat bawdy - conversation with Olly, she didn't notice that her two guests were uncomfortable until Lana let out a squeal over something she had seen in an alley they had gone past.

Practically jumping up on tip-toes from the sound of Lana's high-pitched squeal, Joey spun around and put a hand on her wildly beating heart to get it to calm down again. "Jesus, Lana! You scared the living shit out of me! What the hell was that all about?"

"I think I saw a dog eating a rat in that alley we just went past!" Lana said in a hoarse stage whisper.

"Well, if that's what you think you saw, you probably did," the Skipper said and turned back around. "Damn, now I really need a smoke," she continued, reaching into her breast pocket to take the cigar she had wanted to smoke earlier. With a flick of the wrist, she worked her Zippo and was soon puffing away on the stogie.

Walking along, Lana spent the next fifty yards constantly looking over her shoulder to see if the demon dog would mistakenly think they were on the menu as well. When nothing had happened after a little while, she let out a sigh of relief and scooted even closer to Rebecca.

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A few minutes further on, they reached a tavern that was so boarded up that it looked like it wasn't open for business. The facade to the side street consisted of two windows and a door, but everything had been covered by planks that had been placed in big X'es.

When Joey went up to the door and raised her knuckles like she was about to knock on it, Lana stepped forward and put her hand on the Skipper's arm. "Joey, wait a minute… I'm not sure this is such a good idea. This looks like something out of a third-rate horror movie. Can't we go up to our hotel and get a drink there? They have a fantastic bar in the restaurant where we can sit in real booths."

"Well, I'm sure they do, but this place is only horrible on the outside. The Bait and Spear is the original St. Thomas tavern. It's been here for nearly ten generations," Joey said and took a deep puff on the stogie.

"And they haven't done anything to it since then," Rebecca added flatly, looking at the run-down exterior of the tavern.

Knocking off the ash, Joey put the cigar back in her mouth and pushed it over into the corner of her mouth. "Yeah, well… no, you won't find it in any of the tourist brochures, that's true, but in there, you'll find a genuine St. Thomas atmosphere. And besides that, the owner is a very good friend of ours so we can get the booze for next to nothing."

Looking at each other, Rebecca and Lana communicated silently for a few seconds, eventually ending up with identical shrugs. "Okay. But if we don't like it, could we please go somewhere else?" Lana said.

"Sure. That's a promise. Okay, you gotta line up so Barrett can see you," Joey said and put her hands on Lana's shoulders to guide her into position.

"Uh… who's that…? And what for?" Rebecca said.
"You'll see," Joey said and went up to the door. After tapping a secret code - twice, a brief pause, once, a longer pause and finally twice more - she took a step back and waited for Barrett Gittins, the bouncer, to unlock and open the door.

Moments later, the wooden door creaked open to reveal a man who completely filled out the doorway. Standing at six foot nine and weighing in at three hundred lbs., the St. Thomas native wore boots, black jeans, a dark blue fisherman's pullover and a colorful, knitted rasta-cap to cover his bald head.

Looking down at the group of much shorter women, Barrett's meaty face cracked open in a smile when he spotted Joey and Olly. "Hey, Joey! Welcome back," he said in a deep, rumbling voice as he put out his hand to welcome in the four guests. "You too, Olly Rags, you gorgeous creature. Girl, whenever you feel like changin' teams, just let me know. I'd like to offer myself as your first!"

"Awww, I'll make a note o' that, Barrett. It'll be the same week we have two Thursdays," Olly said on her way inside, pulling a mortified Rebecca with her.

Once Rebecca and Olly had gone in, Joey put a hand on the small of Lana's back and guided her inside. "Hey, Barrett. I'd like you to meet Lana and Rebecca, our customers."

"Pleased to meet ya," Barrett said and put out his large paw. After shaking the women's hands with surprising delicacy, he pointed a fat index finger at Joey. "Oh yeah, were these lovely ladies the guests you painted the Argo for?"

"That's right, Barrett. Is Miguel in?" Joey said and steered her small group over to a table next to one of the boarded-up windows.

"Naw, he's off doin' something I'm not really sure what is. He'll be back later on, though. Maria is working the bar tonight, but she knows the arrangement, so when you're ready for drinks, just do the usual stuff."

"Great. Thanks, Barrett," Joey said as she pulled out a pair of chairs for Rebecca and Lana. "Have a seat, ladies. What can I get you?"

Rebecca started looking for her purse, but Joey just shook her head. "Everything's on me."

"Oh, okay. Well, in that case, I'd like a… uh… a Margarita, please. Uh, if they have it?"

"If it exists, Maria can fix it for you… and if it doesn't, she'll create it. Lana?"

"Oh, I… I don't know. I'm not used to going to clubs and stuff," Lana said, craning her neck to take in the unusual establishment before she sat down.

The tavern was more spacey and a lot cozier than the crummy exterior had suggested. Built solely of dusty, deep brown timber logs, it had a fairly low, wooden ceiling and a floor clearly made of old deck planks, and here and there, smaller, round logs came down from the ceiling at odd angles to create a tight, secluded atmosphere around the ten tables.

A few items related to life at sea in general and fishing in particular adorned the walls, but the sparse displays managed to stay on the good side of tacky. Turning her head the other way, Lana could see a very pretty dark-skinned Latina behind the bar counter, polishing a glass while talking to one of the patrons.

In fact, everywhere she looked, local St. Thomasians were talking and laughing amongst themselves, enjoying beer or drinks - and always smoking - and all in all, everyone seemed to have a good time at The Bait and Spear.
As Lana had feared, clouds of cigarette and cigar smoke hung heavily in the tavern, making her sensitive throat choke up almost at once, and she had to wave her hand under her nose to get it to dissipate.

"Oh… I really don't know… what can you recommend?" she said after a brief bout with indecision. Noticing that Joey was still holding the chair for her, she offered her a quick smile and sat down.

After helping Lana get her heavy, wooden chair pushed in, Joey leaned down to get close to Lana's shoulder. "A spiced rum. We're in the Caribbean, after all."

"I'd like that, please. Thank you," Lana said and got comfortable on the surprisingly plush cushion.

"Gimme a rum, too, Skip," Olly said, pushing a small candle aside so she could have an unhindered look at Rebecca.

"All right, two rum, a Margarita and a beer. Yup," Joey said and spun around on her heel.

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"Ho! Ho! Down the hatch!" Joey shouted and chugged down a shot of spiced rum from a small, unlabeled bottle Maria had given her for free in addition to the other drinks she had bought.

"'atch!" Olly shouted back, matching Joey's movements by leaning her head back and gulping down the golden drink.

Lana just stared in wide-eyed disbelief at the two experienced sailors. Sighing deeply, she looked down at the shot she was holding, wondering why it smelled like something was burning. Looking up, she locked eyes with Joey who smiled back at her.

Not wanting to die any time soon, Lana just took the tiniest sip of the shot, fully expecting to have her innards shoot out of her ears. When the drink was far richer, smoother and tastier than she had anticipated, she looked up at Joey in surprise.

Recognizing the look, Joey let out a belly laugh and poured herself another shot from the small bottle. "Yeah, I know. You won't get any of the tourist rat poison here, Lana. This is the family recipe, the real deal. That recipe has been here even longer than the tavern, for hundreds of years. It's potent, but damn good."

"I'll say… I could get used to this," Lana said and took a larger sip. When she discovered that the second sip tasted even better, she felt brave and chugged down the rest in a single gulp, earning herself a round of applause from Olly.

"God, Miss Ferguson!" was Rebecca's predictable reply.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, Rebecca. Don't you want yours?" Lana said, pointing at Rebecca's untouched glass.

"Is it strong?"

"Sorta."

"I'd rather not, then."

Lana reached out for the glass, but before her fingers could connect with it, Joey had snatched it up and poured the contents back in the bottle. "Ah, that's probably not a good idea, Lana. Easy does it, you know."
"Oh… okay. Uh… I know this is the second time I've made you do it, but do you think you could get me a Diet Coke?" Lana asked, trying to shoot the Skipper a pair of very round, Irish green doe-eyes.

"Oooohh, how could I say no to eyes like that?" Joey said, nudging Olly's ribs with her elbow. "Sure, no problem. D'ya want some white rum in it, Lana?"

"No, just the Diet Coke, please."

"Comin' right up." Joey said and got up from the table.

As the Skipper walked across the wooden floor to get to the bar, Lana followed her with her eyes. Soon, the shot of spiced run in her gut and the sight of Joey's gently wiggling hips mixed together and created a few colorful, uncensored thoughts that left her tingling and quite short of breath.

Shaking her head to get rid of the images, she looked away from Joey only to find Rebecca and Olly cooing at each other and holding hands across the table, clearly lost to the world.

'If I wasn't such a chicken, that could be me and Joey right now… oh, well. She's so experienced she probably doesn't have time for someone like me,' Lana thought and sighed again.

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At the exact same moment the bell on the nearby church tower struck eleven p.m., Joey, Olly, Rebecca and Lana came to a stop in front of the Long Bay Resort hotel. The door man - wearing a stylish uniform - shot the two sailors a slightly pointed look, but Joey just returned it in kind, making him go away.

"I've had a fantastic evening," Rebecca said, clinging onto both Olly's hands.

"So have I, Rebecca. Man, I'm so glad this isn't goodbye but a see-ya-later," Olly said and leaned in to nibble on Rebecca's earlobe.

"Oh God, there they go again," Joey said in a mocking voice, shielding her eyes with her hand.

"Ah, shut up, Skip. That's just babe envy talkin'," Olly growled back. "And you don't even have a reason for it!" she continued, throwing her head in Lana's direction.

Thrusting her hands into her pockets, Joey began to shuffle around on the spot. "Uhhh… ha, ha."

"Sheesh," Olly said and went back to Rebecca's earlobe. "What the hell is wrong with the kids today? Can you tell me that, hon?"

"No, but I know exactly what you mean, Dominique. Listen, I'm…" Rebecca said, debating very hard with herself whether or not she should invite the mechanic up to her suite. Feeling her libido fight an all-out tug of war with her common sense, she finally arrived at a workable - if frustrating - solution. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and moved away from Olly's probing lips. "See ya tomorrow… okay?"

Moving back from Rebecca's ear, Olly stole a quick kiss, but kept holding onto the secretary's hands. "Oh no, look at that… I think someone has glued our hands together!"

"Cute, but… see ya tomorrow, Dominique," Rebecca said and pulled her hands free of the mechanic's warm touch.
Pretending to sob - and earning herself a throaty groan from Lana and Joey at her theatrics - Olly pointed up at the black, starry sky and said: "The damn sun better move its ass back here in a hurry, that's all I'm sayin'!"

"Yeah-yeah Olly, you old, half-drunk smoothie... it won't happen any faster just because you've got an itch in your pants. So, good night, Lana," Joey said and put out her hand, hoping that Lana would shake it.

Lana did something better. Instead of tamely shaking hands, she pulled the unsuspecting Skipper into a strong hug that ended with the two of them sharing a very brief, very chaste kiss on the lips. "G'night, Joey. Sweet dreams," Lana said, offering the baffled Skipper a dazzling smile.

"Oh, her dreams are gonna be really sweet, all right... look at that smirk on her mug," Olly said, pointing at the goofy grin that was plastered all over Joey's lips.

"Shaddup, Olly," Joey mumbled.

"Yeah, right. Good night, ladies," the mechanic continued and wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders.

"'Night, Olly... Joey," Lana and Rebecca said as one, waving at the two sailors as they began a slow walk down the sloping street.

Once Joey and Olly were out of earshot, Lana and Rebecca turned towards each other - a split second later, they both broke down in a very bad case of the giggles.

"God, I can't believe this is happening... I mean, how can it be happening...? To me, of all people," Rebecca said as she and Lana walked arm in arm towards the front door of the hotel.

As the door man held the double doors open, Lana slid inside and let out a little laugh. "I don't know, but I wish it would happen to me, too."

"Nuh-uh, you can't have Dominique... she's all mine," Rebecca said, bumping shoulders with the blonde woman on their way over to the stairwell.

"Noooo, not Olly... the Skip! Joey Swain, keeper of the most gorgeous blue eyes I've ever seen outside of a photoshopped ad." Suddenly sobering, Lana pulled Rebecca to a halt at the first landing and put her hands on the secretary's upper arms. "Is something wrong with me? I mean, you'd say if something was wrong with me, right?"

"Lana, there's nothing at all wrong with you. Olly and I just connected at first sight. Maybe it'll just take a little longer with you and the Skipper... hey... why do you look at me like that?" Rebecca said, furrowing her brow at the curious look on Lana's face.

"You called me Lana! God, for the first time ever!"

"Well... just makes a woman forget her manners..." Suddenly breaking out into a huge blush for revealing something like that, Rebecca pulled Lana into a hug and gave her a little crush. "I'm tipsy...!"

"You could call it that, yes... I'm not surprised, after three Margaritas. Come on, let's get the rest of the way upstairs so you can pass out on your bed," Lana said and put her arm around Rebecca's waist.
On their way back down to the Argo, Joey and Olly's mood couldn't be more different. Olly was whistling loudly and occasionally breaking out into a bawdy song, but Joey was sulking with her clenched fists firmly thrust into the pockets of her shorts.

"Aw, lighten up, Skip. Ain't life grand?" Olly said, bumping shoulders with her boss.

"For you, maybe."

"Come on, Skip... what's the matter? Did you forget what to do with a girl? Hey, lemme show you. First you lean in, like this... then, you pucker up your lips like this," Olly said and moved so close to Joey that they were almost breathing the same air.

"Oh, get away, Olly...! I didn't forget. I think she's just a cold fish."

"Uh... who are we talking about, exactly? 'Cos I thought we were talking about-"

"Lana."

"Lana? The blonde woman with the green eyes who just kissed you goodnight? A cold fish? Hello, earth to Joey Swain...?" Olly said and pulled the two of them to a stop outside a tourist store that had closed down for the night.

"What about her makes you say that she's a cold fish...? 'Cos I'm not seeing it, frankly."

"Ah, it's just... I don't know. She seems so on-and-off. First she shoots me a fiery look, then it's nothing... then she stares at my wetsuit like her eyes are about to roll out of her head, then she says absolutely nothing at all when we're alone on the bridge... I don't know," Joey said and resumed walking back to the boat.

"Unless I'm seriously drunk, I could'a sworn she just kissed ya, Skip?"

Sticking her fists back into her pockets, Joey shrugged and picked up the pace, hoping that it would make Olly less inclined to ask further questions. "That wasn't a kiss, Olly. That was just a chaste peck on the lips... it was the spiced rum talking. Ah, no big deal. She looks great, but there are plenty of great looking girls out there."

Olly slowed down briefly and rolled her eyes repeatedly, but soon caught back up with her Skipper. "Oh, sure there are... but there's only one Lana Ferguson," she whispered for Joey's ears only.

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CHAPTER 5

After checking the depth gauge, the weights, the snorkel, the mask, the tank, the oxygen gauge and finally her wristwatch, Lana sat down on the small bench on the rear deck of the Argo and let out a long sigh.

She was bothered by the weight of the air tank that was strapped tightly onto her upper back, especially because the tank was much larger than the one she had used for her practice dive - she simply needed more air than the smaller tank could hold - and also by the two shoulder straps that cut into her skin because of the added weight.

Sighing again, she put on her swim fins and the tight, black neoprene hood she had borrowed to protect her scalp and looked across the rear deck at Rebecca who was going through the same procedures, except that she still had the smaller tank.
Olly stood at the railing with a pair of binoculars, sweeping the entire horizon from north to south.

"Is anything wrong, Olly? You look a little worried today," Lana said, once again checking her gear.

"Not really. There's a fishing boat some way off to our starboard side, but they've been holding station for the entire time we've been here," Olly said, adjusting the zoom on the binoculars.

"A fishing boat? If they came closer, could Joey get caught by a hook or something while she was down there…?"

"Oh, no…"

"Oh. Okay," Lana said, sighing again.

"… but they might attract sharks," Olly said quietly, causing both Lana and Rebecca to stop what they were doing and look up in a panic.

"Sharks…?" Lana whispered, thinking about all the horrific stories she'd heard about shark attacks.

Putting away the binoculars, Olly sat down next to Rebecca and put her arm around the secretary's waist. "Mmmm. I think we'll be fine. There aren't any seagulls hovering over the boat, so I don't think they've caught anything yet."

"But they might…?" Rebecca said, leaning into Olly's touch.

"Sure."

"Olly, what should we do if we see a shark down there?" Lana said, slowly feeling like she should be biting her fingernails over Joey's safety.

"Depends on what kind of shark it is, Lana. Yeah, I know, that's not an answer, but it really does depend on that. What you gotta remember is that there's more than one species… we've got dozens of different sharks out there. Some of them couldn't care less about you and some will be looking to use your thigh bone as a tooth pick."

"Brrrrr," Lana said, getting a bad case of the shivers.

Leaning in to give Rebecca a quick kiss on the cheek, Olly began to run her fingers through the secretary's ash blonde, shoulder-length hair, earning herself a few giggles in the process. "Mmmm. Some of them can be mean and nasty, all right. But the worst shark of all is still mankind in general."

"You know, Olly," Lana said and shuffled around on the hard bench which cut into her only partially covered rearward-facing cheeks, "back home in New York City, people talk a lot about the environment, but it's never really connected with me before. I've always considered it a load of hot air by the holier-than-thou crowd… but since we've been here… wow. Here, the environment isn't just something we read about on web sites… here, we're really… uh, here. In the middle of it… pardon my limited vocabulary," Lana said and chuckled.

"I concur. Being here has really opened my eyes," Rebecca said.

"That's great, guys. We definitely need more people to see what-" - Olly was cut off mid-stream by Joey resurfacing behind the Argo. Jumping up, the mechanic went back to the rear deck and knelt down. "What's up, Skip?"

Not bothering to take out her mouthpiece, Joey just pointed at Rebecca and Lana and then displayed a thumbs-down, wordlessly telling Olly to give the gear of the two tourists a final pre-dive check.
"Okay, Skip. All right, you're up. One at a time, please," Olly said to Rebecca and Lana.

Rebecca got up first and flapped over to the rear deck, hunched over from the weight of the air tank on her back.

After checking Rebecca's equipment, Olly gave her a thumbs-up and watched the secretary kneel down and disappear into the deep blue sea. "Lana, it's your turn," Olly continued, checking the gauges for malfunctions and the hoses for any unseen kinks.

"Hey… don't worry about the sharks. The Skip is far too experienced to let anything happen. I always say she's part mermaid… she can sniff out trouble at five leagues' distance! Okay?"

"Okay," Lana said through her mouthpiece, nodding and showing the okay-sign when she realized Olly hadn't understood her.

Walking up to the edge of the rear deck, Lana knelt down and let herself fall backwards into the ocean, soon feeling the water rush over her head.

Once she was in, she quickly twisted around on an axis to try to find Rebecca and Joey - but when she did, she discovered that because of the larger tank, her center of gravity had changed since her first dive, and she found herself tumbling sideways for several seconds until she could regain her balance.

Needing a moment to catch her breath and re-focus from the dizzying roll, Lana remained stationary in the water for a few seconds, but then continued towards her two diving mates who were further below, near the sand shoal they were going to explore.

Finally arriving at Joey and Rebecca, Lana was met by a questioning okay-sign from the Skipper that she responded to by returning the okay-sign and nodding.

Nodding back, Joey momentarily left her two rookies to dive even closer to the sandy ocean floor. Skimming the surface, she swept the area a couple of times before holding her hand up in an invitation to Lana and Rebecca to join her.

Lana, still struggling with the heavier tank, tried valiantly to comply, but after a few seconds, it was quite clear to Joey that the rookie diver was having difficulties with the changed center of gravity, and she decided to pull the plug on the dive.

After holding up her hand in the stop sign, she immediately made a thumbs-up and went over to support Lana on the ascent.

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"Shit… shit, shit, shit!" Lana said, thumping her fist down onto her thigh. "I'm sorry, Skip… I screwed up," she said, breathing deeply as she sat on the rear deck of the Argo with her legs and swim fins dipping down into the sea.

"It wasn't your fault, Lana," Joey said, putting a comforting hand on the blonde's shoulder. "The tank was just too heavy for you. It happens, don't beat yourself up because of it. Hey, Olly, the small one wasn't enough and the large one was too heavy… d'ya think it would work with two small tanks on a twin rig?"

"Dunno, Skip, but I'll give it a shot… it's gonna take me about ten minutes, though," Olly said and moved over to stand next to the bridge. "Hey… you okay, Lana?" she continued, leaning against the pilot house.

"Yeah, yeah, I am… thanks, Olly."
"Great. I'll be back in a little while," Olly said and walked up the starboard side path.

Once the mechanic had left, Lana looked out over the ocean and sighed deeply. "I'm just a little peeved with myself. You know, Skip, this tank was even heavier than the one I wore when I got my certificate. It was just too big for me. I couldn't control it at all."

Sitting down on the small bench next to Rebecca, Joey took off her swim fins and wiggled her toes in the strong sunshine. "Well, there's your answer, then. The right tank is vital when it comes to having a successful dive. Ah, don't sweat it. How many dives have you had now?"

"Uh… counting the ones at the course, five."

"Lana, I've been down there more than two thousand times and it still isn't routine," Joey said and clapped the swim fins together to get the excess water off them.

"Wow… really? Olly did say that you were part mermaid…" Lana said and reached out to put her hand on Joey's calf.

Liking the touch, Joey let out a little laugh and patted Lana's hand. "I wonder if they'd let me join their trade union with my tattoos and everything…? Perhaps I could be some kind of human-mermaid liaison…?"

Chiming in, Rebecca pretended to think hard about the question. "Oh, I don't know, Skip. We did have tuna casserole last night… might kill your chances," she said, earning herself a couple of laughs.

Out of the corner of her eye, Joey suddenly spotted the fishing boat slowly coming towards the Argo. Snatching Olly's binoculars, she zoomed in on the name at the bow of the small pleasure craft. "Oh, great, it's the Ginny Tonic. Larry Pickett's boat. Oh, swell… just what we needed."

Hopping up from the rear deck and flopping over to the railing on her swim fins, Lana shielded her eyes from the sun and looked out towards the other boat that had come quite a lot closer than when Olly had observed it earlier. "Why does that sound familiar…? Is it someone we should know about?"

"Nah. He's just a pain in the ass. A pain in *my* ass! A real Dapper Don. He's one of the other fishing tour operators, and as such, one of our worst competitors."

"Lawrence Pickett, of course! I checked out his web site before I found yours," Lana said, suddenly realizing that they were about to visited by what looked like a group of three or four tourists in addition to the captain at the helm.

"Well, I'm glad you continued with your search. Of course, Larry is just a walking dickhead, so if you had chosen him, you'd already be back in the Big Apple by now," Joey said surly.

Lana looked down at herself and felt a chill creep up and down her spine - once she had survived the initial, heart-stopping embarrassment the day before, she had grown accustomed to wearing the skintight emerald green bathing suit in the presence of Joey, Olly and Rebecca, but now she felt horribly exposed. "Uh-oh…!" she mumbled, thinking hard and fast what she could do about it.

Rebecca immediately understood her friend's predicament, and she hurriedly took off her swim fins and ran down the stairs. Less than half a minute later, she came back with two identical white bathrobes, one of which she threw over Lana's shoulders while putting on the other herself.

"God, thank you, Rebecca… I love you dearly," Lana said and quickly put her arms down the sleeves, closed the robe and tied the belt across her stomach.
Joey - being more dressed and less sensitive - stood up and walked over to stand next to Lana. Leaning forward, she put her elbows on the railing and waited for the Ginny Tonic to close the distance between the two boats.

It wasn't long before the captain of the other ship took off his white cap and waved it in the air. "Ahoy, Argo! Are you in trouble?" he said in a smug, condescending voice.

Lawrence Pickett was a skinny man in his late forties with a narrow face and a hawkish nose, and he was wearing a classic sailor's outfit made to look exactly like the ones he had seen the upper echelon wear in the glittery magazines - navy blue pants and a matching vest over a white shirt, and finally a white Captain's cap that he put on a bit crooked to give an illusion of class and swagger.

"No, Larry, are you?" Joey replied laconically.

"Always the joker, Swain. Scuba diving, eh? Can't be a lot of money in that…?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised, Larry."

"Anyway, I just saw your old bucket and I thought I'd pay you a visit. I got some nice folks with me from Quebec. They can't understand that it hasn't rained yet in the week they've been here!" Lawrence said and let out an obnoxious laugh - the people in question leaned over the railing and waved at the divers.

Lana and Rebecca duly waved back, but Joey remained passive.

"Yeah? Well, I got some nice folks with me from New York City who can't understand how someone with a head your size can even steer a boat," Joey said.

An evil silence filled the air between the boats for a couple of seconds, but then Lawrence Pickett let out another of his obnoxious laughs, apparently treating the barb as a joke. "Always the joker, Swain… always the joker. Where' you headed?"

"Nowhere in particular," Joey said, knowing that if she mentioned the treasure map, the entire island would know about it by nightfall at the very latest.

"Yeah? We're going to swing by the British Virgins next. Heard someone found some Marlin over there."

"Right. Good fishin', then," Joey said and moved away from the railing, hoping that Lawrence would catch her drift for once.

Miraculously, it seemed that he did, because after tooting his fanfare horns, he steered away from the Argo, and a couple of minutes later, the Ginny Tonic was already a good distance away from them.

"Wow, what a… what a… blowhard," Rebecca said as she took off her bathrobe.

"Mmmm," Joey said, sitting down on the small bench. "And he was even in a good mood today. He's probably milked those Canadians for a lot more than the trip is worth."

Flopping back to the spot at the edge of the rear deck, Lana took off her bathrobe and sat down again, soon putting her legs over the side of the boat. "Holy cow, am I glad I didn't choose him. Wow, I would've slapped him across the face before we'd even left the harbor," she said with a giggle.

"Well, if you had, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. He tried to buy me out about six months ago. I had a little cash flow problem just before Christmas and he came in flashing a wad of green."
"Oh, Jeez, that makes me dislike him even more… what happened?" Lana said, turning around so she could look the Skipper in the eye.

"He wanted Olly to stay for entirely personal reasons… you know how some people just can't fathom the obvious, right?"

"Uh… yeah," Lana said with a dark chuckle.

"Anyway, Larry wanted Olly's services but she turned him down… no, actually, she kneed him in the groin. He sorta lost interest after that."

"Ooooh…!" Lana and Rebecca said as one.

Arriving back with a new harness, Olly carefully put the twin rigging down on the deck and dusted off her hands. "Hey, was that Larry Pickett's voice I heard just now?"

"Sure was, Olly. The Ginny Tonic was over for a social call," Joey said and got up to help the mechanic strap the harness onto Lana's back.

"I shoulda known… I felt like throwin' up," Olly mumbled as she knelt down behind the blonde diver.

Looking over her shoulder, Lana put out her arms so the shoulder straps could slide over them. "Would it help if I got up?"

"Naw, I got it… almost there," Olly said, reaching around Lana to close the belly strap. When the two ends came together in a loud, robust *click*, she gave Lana's shoulder a little squeeze. "There ya go, Lana. This should work a lot better."

"Well, it's definitely easier up here on dry land," Lana said, wiggling around to test out the new modification. "I think this'll work, actually."

Joey quickly crouched down and gave the air hoses and the locks a final check. "Yep, should work. All right, let's get back down there. Time's a-wastin'."

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A few minutes later, the three divers assembled at the ocean floor, moving around in a pre-designed pattern that offered them the most efficient way to search the sandy shoal they were at.

Lana, feeling a lot more comfortable with the twin tanks, tried out different moves and maneuvers just to see how the center of gravity had shifted again. Most of them worked, but she still couldn't flip over without looking like a pregnant elephant on ice, no matter how hard she tried.

Growling under her mouthpiece, she noticed that she had fallen a little way behind Rebecca and Joey, and she flapped her feet hard to catch up.

Behind her, out of her line of sight, the flapping motion created a disturbance in the water that stirred up some sand. As the sand moved around and fell down again, it revealed a small artifact that shone brightly in the semi-clear light.

---
Once the three divers had reached the end of their search area, Joey held up her hand in the stop-sign. Hovering in the water, she waited for Rebecca and Lana to catch up with her, and once they had, she pointed at both of them and then at her own oxygen gauge.

When both rookies showed her an okay-sign indicating that they were still in the green regarding their air, she returned it and made a ninety-degree turn to try out a new area.

Swimming slowly along the sandy bottom, Joey kept her eyes glued to the floor in the off-chance that they would actually find anything at all, but after the second leg of the search had been as fruitless as the first, she began to have doubts on the value of their location.

Stopping at the end of the leg, Joey held up her hand and waved Rebecca and Lana over to her. After once again asking them about their oxygen supply and getting a positive answer, she showed them a series of signals that said that they should remain in place while she scouted ahead.

Lana and Rebecca both nodded and sent the experienced diver okay-signs.

As Joey flipped around and swam away, Lana had to do a double-take at the speed the Skipper was able to move at when she didn't have to drag the two rookies along. In three strokes, the former Navy diver was up and gone, and it wasn't long before she was completely out of sight.

Feeling curiously agitated for some reason, Lana began to look around at her surroundings to see if anything had triggered her sixth sense. In the meantime, Rebecca had moved a few feet upwards and was looking at the underside of the Argo's long, broad-shouldered hull that was floating on the surface a good fifty yards away, but Lana knew that it couldn't be something as simple as that.

Looking around at the empty space around them, she began to work herself into a bit of a state, practically sensing that something major was about to happen - then she remembered Olly's words about the many species of sharks, and how the creatures could be attracted by the fishing boat that had been near them.

Lana felt her heart rate go up quite dramatically and she felt chilled to the bone - not the best condition to be in thirty feet below the surface of the Atlantic ocean. Her movements became gradually more frantic and she suddenly began to breathe far too hard for her own safety.

The only thing saving Lana from going into a full scale panic attack was the sight of Joey returning fast, but even then, she trembled quite badly and had trouble staying in place without using too much of her strength.

Gliding through the water, Joey could see from thirty yards' distance that Lana was in poor shape, and she mentally whacked herself over the head for thinking that it would be all right to leave the two rookies alone. Quickly moving very close to the panicky diver, Joey gently grabbed hold of Lana's upper arms and exuded a perfect calmness, almost like she was trying to share some of her own strength.

After a few seconds, Lana calmed down enough to wave her hand over her head, showing the experienced diver the sign for 'I'm in trouble.'

Nodding, Joey showed Lana an okay-sign and a thumbs-up, and then began a slow ascent, not forgetting to alert Rebecca that they were going up.

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Once the three drivers resurfaced some seventy yards away from the Argo, Lana hurriedly removed her mask and her mouthpiece and took several deep breaths as she treseted water. She felt mightily relieved at being able to look at
the blue sky, but at the same time, she felt like the world's biggest loser for going into a panic without any reason whatsoever.

Leaning her head back, she let out a bitter chuckle that was soon followed by a few equally bitter tears. "I'm sorry, Skip. I'm such a fuckup."

"Don't worry about it, Lana," Joey said after pushing her mouthpiece to the side. "I've done much worse myself. Can you get back to the Argo unassisted?"

"Yeah… yeah, I can," Lana said quietly, thankful that she hadn't been yelled at.

"She doesn't have to, I'll help," Rebecca said and moved in close on the other side in case Lana needed a hand.

"Thanks, Rebecca. I think I got it… but I guess four swim fins are better than two… especially considering that mine are attached to two left feet…"

Putting her mouthpiece back in, Joey moved around the other side of Lana and swam next to her, keeping a very close eye on the petite woman's progress.

Half an hour later, a freshly showered - and still emotionally crushed - Lana sat in the pantry, holding a Diet Coke and practicing her thousand-mile stare. Sighing deeply, she shifted on the chair to cross her legs the other way.

Knocking on the door post, Joey popped her head inside the pantry to see if her guest needed anything. When she saw that the expression on Lana's face resembled something from a rainy day, she moved into the pantry and pulled out a chair.

"Hey. You're being too hard on yourself again, Lana," Joey said quietly, putting her elbows on the melamine-plated table. "You panicked, yes, but we all came back in one piece. That's the most important part."

"Thanks for being so lenient with me, Skip. I know you'd much rather give me a stiff dressing down instead."

"No."

"Well, you should 'cos I fucked up," Lana said with a shrug. When the Skipper didn't offer a reply to the contrary, she took a long swig from the Diet Coke.

Nearly half a minute went by before Joey leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs at the knee. "Let me tell you a story about fucking up, Lana," Joey said, toying with a loose bit of plastic on her flip-flops. "Once upon a time, a young rookie had her tank seize up on her at sixty feet in murky waters at the bottom of an industrial port, not because she was unlucky, but because she thought she was immortal. You see, she had treated the tank carelessly by not checking the air valves. If that rookie's instructor hadn't paid attention, she would have been six feet under by now instead of being here, chatting with you."

"Mmmm…?"

"Yeah, so I know what's involved in fucking up. What happened to you today was bad, I know that, but you didn't do anything wrong, Lana. You kept a level head and you didn't fly off the edge. Trust me, what you did was babypoop compared to what some of the people I've dived with have done. Jeez, I remember one guy from Jersey who actually pulled off his snorkel down below because he thought there was an ant in it."
"Thanks for trying to cheer me up, Joey, but… I just can't get over the fact that it was all my own doing," Lana said and propped her chin up on her arm.

"What actually happened down there?"

"I began imagining things. I guess I stupidly started to believe that something was about to happen. Probably something bad, but uh… I… uh… while you did the initial dive to check out the site, Rebecca and I spoke to Olly about fishing boats… and sharks. And no, it wasn't Olly's fault… it was my fault and my fault alone. Rebecca could rise above it, I should've been able to do so as well."

"Hmmm"-ing out loud, Joey reached into her breast pocket and produced a small bundle that she had wrapped in a napkin. Treating the item very carefully, she unfolded the napkin and pushed it into the center of the table.
"Something did happen down there, Lana. Look. It's a stainless steel spoon."

"Wow…" Lana said, suddenly snapping out of her dark thoughts. Pulling the napkin closer, she picked it up and began to study the spoon with laser-like intensity.

"Now, Lana… before you get all excited and call CNN on the satellite phone about a possible treasure cache, let me tell you that it's obviously not from Blackbeard's period. No, I'm guessing it was dropped into the sea fairly recently by someone on an adventure cruise. It could even be from Larry Pickett's boat for all we know."

"Oh…"

"But it doesn't change the fact that you actually found something… well, you and Rebecca, of course. People waste years and years of their lives simply to find a fragment of something, and here you are, finding a little treasure on your very first, proper dive. So you see, it wasn't a complete fuckup, was it?"

Leaning forward, Joey put a warm hand on the side of Lana's face and began to caress her cheek with her thumb.
"You actually did pretty good, all things considered."

"I guess…" Lana husked, leaning into the touch.

The tender moment only lasted for a few seconds, but when Joey leaned back in her chair, she felt quite a lot less confused about the state of affairs between herself and Lana than she had done before she had caressed Lana's cheek.

Smiling shyly at each other, Joey and Lana sent out identical, clear and unencrypted messages that said they were both ready to take their budding relationship to the next level - which meant one step above purely platonic.

Joey didn't need a second invitation, so she got up from her chair, moved around the table and sat down next to Lana. Seeking out the blonde's hand, she took it once it was offered to her and gave it a little squeeze, keeping it underneath the table for the time being.

"Listen, Joey, do you think we could go out again today? It's like falling down on your skis, you have to get back up at once," Lana said, scooting closer to the Skipper.

Looking at the clock on the wall that read a quarter past four in the afternoon, Joey scratched her hairline with her free hand. "I wouldn't know, I've never tried skiing. For skis, you have to have snow and cold weather and brrrr, no thanks."

"Silly! But the diving?"
"I can't say right now, Lana. I need to check the weather first. It's changed since you came down here. The horizon to the east is quite dark. I've tried diving in a storm and, uh, I can't recommend it. No, I think we should wait until tomorrow."

"Oh… but-" Lana started to say, but suddenly remembered the first ground rule: The Skipper has The Final Word. "Oh. Okay."

"You were about to say something?" Joey said after a little while.

"No, never mind. What are Rebecca and Olly doing? It's so quiet… I wonder if they're in some kind of trouble…?" Lana said, scooting even closer to Joey.

"Well, they are… of the kissing kind. That's why I came down here in the first place, they were breathing so hard up on the bridge they didn't leave any oxygen for me…"

"Oh… while we're on that subject… I, uh… I guess I wouldn't object to a kiss right now myself," Lana said quietly, turning her head to give Joey's profile a closer look.

Breaking out into a shy smile, Joey moved her hand upwards until it rested on the back of Lana's head. Mussing the blonde hair, Joey leaned in and a bit down until their lips were only inches apart.

The air between them was already electric and it only grew more intense when Lana decided to cut to the chase and moved forward, claiming the Skipper's soft lips in a kiss that began slow but soon evolved into something far stronger.

Once the need for air overcame the need to stay connected, Lana pulled back and broke out in a wide, charming grin. "Wow… we should have done that earlier… like last night at The Bait and Spear."

"You kiss like a dream, girl," Joey husked, ready to take it to second or even third base right away - but unfortunately for both of them, reality caught up with them in the shape of Olly Rags knocking on the door post.

"Skipper, I'm sorry to be a thorn in your shorts, but you need to come up to the bridge. We just got a severe weather warning from the NHC," Olly said before backing out of the doorway.

"Shit… thanks, Olly!" Joey said and scooted away from the table.

Bolting upright, Lana hurriedly put a hand on Joey's leg to get her to slow down. "Wait… what's the NHC?"

"It's the National Hurricane Center, but don't take that literally, they're just the weather people… Oh God, this is gonna sound so pathetic… but I'm sorry, baby… I gotta go," Joey said with an apologetic smile on her lips.

Lana let out a belly laugh and went the other way around the table as she followed Joey out of the pantry and down to the stairs.

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Tuning the radio to the US Coast Guard frequency of 2182 MHz, Olly quickly turned up the sound so they could hear the weather warning that ran in a non-stop loop.

Severe weather warning. Repeat, severe weather warning. Low pressure front south east of US Virgin Islands. Wind speeds will increase to fresh to strong. Warning, gale force winds over the basin through this evening. North westerly winds will increase Monday afternoon ahead of a front moving north west through the West Atlantic. Expected to strike St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John and Water Island late Monday afternoon or early evening. The front will weaken and slow down as it reaches…’ a female voice said in a sober but not gloomy tone.

"A gale warning, just what we needed," Joey said and scanned the south-eastern horizon with her binoculars. In the far distance, the sky had turned a shade of gray that the experienced sailor knew all too well. "Yep, she's out there, all right. I'll give her… oh, hour and a half, maybe an hour and forty-five before she's here."

"But… but what are we going to do, Skip?" Rebecca said, twisting her T-shirt in her hands.

"Don't worry about it, Rebecca. We have plenty of time to clear it. Olly, I need a word," Joey said and put away the binoculars. Turning towards Rebecca and Lana, she offered them a quick but reassuring smile. "Ladies, I'd rather you went below. I promise that Olly or I will be down in a little while to tell you what we're going to do. Okay?"

"Okay, Skip," Rebecca said, but the look on her face showed that she wasn't particularly thrilled about the situation. Unwrapping her fists from her T-shirt, she turned around and walked down the stairs to get to the cabins.

Lana stayed a little while longer, holding her hand across her mouth. After a brief pause, she nodded and followed Rebecca below.

Turning to the plotting table, Joey quickly began to work out what they could do to avoid the storm. After making sure their guests were out of earshot, she sighed deeply and tapped her index finger on the charts. "We don't have enough time to go back to Charlotte Amalie, Olly."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that… but I didn't want to cause any alarm while the girls were here," Olly said, fiddling with her zipper.

"There aren't any good sites along the coast we're at now, but there is something we could do… it would mean that we'd have to head into the storm, though."

"Hook Island, Skip?"

"Exactly," Joey said, tapping her finger on a small, uninhabited island to the north-east of St. Thomas. "I reckon we could be there in an hour and twenty. Maybe less if we give the old Napiers a good kick."

"They're up for it… and we've definitely got enough fuel, even if we squeeze 'em a little. We can always run at a reduced pace on the return trip," Olly said, calculating the fuel consumption rates in her head.

"Mmmm. Have you ever been to Hook Island?"

"No, but I've gone past it a couple of times."

"I've been there, but only in smaller boats. There's a small bay slash large lagoon surrounded by a rocky ridge to the north-west of the island. We could enter the lagoon and drop the anchor close to the shore… it should be deep enough for the Argo. Also, I think the ridge will shield us from the worst of the storm."

"And then head ashore or what?"
"Yeah, in the dingy. I mean, I reckon you and me could handle it, but I'd rather not risk it with Lana and Rebecca."

"Good point, Skip."

Nodding, Joey moved over to the controls to check the gauges. "Besides, you know how difficult it is to get the stench of vomit out of the cabins."

"*Very* good point, Skip. Avoidin' any Landlubber Fountains would definitely improve my day," Olly said and laughed out loud. Pulling her zipper all the way up, she pointed her thumb at the rear deck and began to move towards the stairs. "I'll be in the engine bay working on the pre-start. If we're gonna give 'em a kick, I need to check up on a few things first."

"Okay, Olly. I'll hail the Harbor Master on the radio to tell him our plans so he won't worry about us when we don't return to Charlotte Amalie. Then I'll go downstairs and brief our passengers."

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"… so that's what we're going to go," Joey said five minutes later down in Rebecca's cabin where both the secretary and Lana were sitting on the bunk, holding each other's hand for comfort.

"And you're sure we can get to Hook Island before the storm hits us, Skip?" Rebecca said, once again twisting her T-shirt in her free hand.

"I can't say for sure, Rebecca. Storms are notoriously unpredictable… that's why they're often named after women, ha ha," Joey said, but soon realized that the attempt at humor went down like a lead balloon. "Uh, anyway, we have a fair shot at it."

Shuffling around on the bunk, Rebecca ended up sitting on her ice cold hands to try to get some heat back into them. "I've experienced a tropical storm once, back when I was only a little girl. My parents and I were visiting my mother's family in the Florida Keys when it hit us… I can't remember the name of the storm, but for years afterwards, I used to wet my bed if the wind was up, even if it was just a summer breeze…"

An uncomfortable, embarrassed silence filled the small cabin, causing Rebecca to look down at the floor.

Nodding, Lana leaned in towards her friend and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "We'll protect each other, Rebecca… won't we, Skip?"

"Of course we will. We're a team, aren't we? And don't forget, this has only been categorized as a gale, not a tropical storm. Anyway, from what I remember, the beach inside the lagoon is wide and sandy so we shouldn't have a problem finding shelter in case the rain gets heavy. We'll bring some supplies and stuff… who knows, it may even end up being cozy."

Rebecca let out a dark chuckle that proved that she didn't quite believe the Skipper's words. "Thanks for trying to comfort me, Skip. I just wanted to let you know about my fear of storms before I turn into a blubbering mess without warning…"

"Oh, by the way, we're going to run the engines a bit harder than what you've heard so far, so they'll sound differently. Just so you know, okay?" Joey said and moved out of the cabin to go back to the bridge.

"Okay. Thanks, Skip."
As Joey moved the curtain back down, Lana got up from the bunk and followed the Skipper into the corridor between the cabins. "Joey, wait up, please," she said, putting her hand on Joey's elbow.

"Look, I really gotta-" Joey said, but Lana shut her up by standing on tip-toes and claiming her lips in a sweet, little kiss meant to bring plenty of good fortune.

"Good luck. That's all I wanted to say," Lana whispered and winked at the Skipper.

"Hell, you can wish me good luck anytime, hon," Joey whispered back in a voice that sounded suspiciously like Popeye the Sailor.

---

A few minutes later, the engines roared to life, sending the customary vibrations through the hull and into the cabin where Rebecca had huddled down on her bunk to preserve her strength. "That was the engines, right?" she said, cracking open an eyelid.

"Yeah," Lana said, sitting on the chair reading the first few pages of a dusty, old pulp detective novel she had found in the metal locker.

Soon, the engine note changed from the quiet burble it had been the entire trip to a deeper, growlier song that gave a hint at how powerful they actually were.

When the engine note changed again to a full-blown, bassy roar that went straight into their chest cavities, Rebecca forgot all about her discomfort and swung her legs over the side of the bunk. Getting up in a hurry, she quickly moved over to the porthole and peeked outside. "Whoa! Whoa, come take a look, Lana…! Holy mackerel, we must be going at… gosh, forty miles an hour, if not more!"

"What? Let me see," Lana said and moved over next to her friend. "Wow, you're right… look at those waves flying by… I guess that's why it's called a Fast Patrol Boat."

"No kiddin'… boy, am I glad I'm down here instead of up on the bridge. I'm sure the Skipper and Dominique have their hands full going at this breakneck speed!"

Blinking a few times, Lana went back to the chair and picked up the book. After a few seconds, she put it back down and began to chew her fingernails. "I wish you hadn't said that, Rebecca… now you've made me nervous…!" she said with her index and middle fingers stuck firmly in her mouth.

"Oh… sorry. You can use my bunk if you want to," Rebecca said, far too preoccupied with looking out of the porthole to worry about being frightened of the impending storm.

"Mmmm… I might," Lana said and tried the book again. Finally giving up after reading the same paragraph three times in a row, she put it away for good and folded her legs up underneath her, feeling the strong vibrations of the engines permeate her entire body.

* * *

CHAPTER 6
Thundering along at thirty knots, the Argo cut through the growing waves like they weren't there at all, easily riding the foam-tipped crests on its way to Hook Island.

On the bridge, Joey kept a firm grip on the wheel and a close eye on the gauges, the compass, the barometer and the ominous steel gray cloud that blossomed quite rapidly in the eastern sky.

Pulling the cover off the brass speaking tube, she leaned down towards it without taking her eyes off what mattered. "What's up, Olly?" she said loudly to be heard over the roar of the engines.

'A-okay so far, Skip! It's hotter than hell down here and my ears are ringing but other than that, it's A-okay!'

"Thanks, Olly," Joey said and moved back to the wheel, leaving the tube open in case Olly needed to speak with her.

Reaching over, she turned the radio back up, but the weather warning message hadn't changed since the first time they had heard it. "Mmmm… this is going to be a closer shave than I had expected it to be…" she mumbled to herself as she saw the first lightning bolts deep inside the storm cloud.

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Twenty minutes later, the waves had grown so large and angry that Joey had to reduce speed to first twenty, then fifteen knots in order to keep the Argo in one piece as it crested the waves.

'How much longer, Skip?' Olly said from the engine bay.

"A few minutes. I have the island lined up. The sea is kinda choppy now but-

'No shit, Skipper!'

"Ha ha. As soon as we get leeward of the island itself, it should calm down. I can see the inlet to the lagoon clear as day, Olly. Stand by."

'Standing by."

Making a course correction to get closer to the inlet, Joey allowed her mind to wander briefly. "Jeez, I wonder how Lana and Rebecca are holding up down there… I hope they're not puking their guts out…" she mumbled to herself as she compensated for the strong currents.

Furrowing her brow, she changed the engine room telegraph to 'all ahead, slow' to give herself some time and space to maneuver.

'All ahead slow, aye, Skip,' Olly said from the engine bay, and at once, the engines changed note again, slowing down to the pre-set pace.

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In Rebecca's cabin, Lana and Rebecca had swapped positions - Rebecca was on the chair, looking a little green around the gills, and Lana was in the bunk with a facial color that was a perfect match for her Irish green eyes.

"Gawwwd…" she croaked, hoping that the torture would soon be over. Out of morbid curiosity, she tried to remember the last time she had thrown up, but the perpetual up-down movement of the ship prevented her brain from functioning normally.
When the rolling boat suddenly gained a left-right movement in addition to the up-down, Lana was first pushed up against the bulkhead and then very nearly off the bunk. "What the hell is she doing up there…?!" she barked, unsuccessfully trying to grab hold of one of the bunk's posts.

Rebecca scrambled to her feet and fumbled over to the porthole to see what was going on - "Oh… we're nearly at the island now, Lana. The waters should get a lot calmer in a hurry…"

The words had hardly left Rebecca's mouth before the Argo settled down into a gently pitching roll that quickly gave way to a smooth ride once the patrol boat entered the calm waters near the island.

Looking to her left, Rebecca could see that the hard rocking had been caused by the boat crossing the surf on the way into the inlet. "Lana, come take a look… we're at the island now. We're going into a lagoon of some kind."

"Gawd, I'm glad that's over," Lana croaked as she swung her legs over the side of the bunk. Groaning loudly, she got up and wobbled over to the porthole to see for herself.

Opening one of the sliding windows in the bridge, Joey stuck her head out to get a feel for the air. Recognizing that they still had some time - but feeling the first drops of rain on her face - she moved back inside and closed the window.

"Olly, you can come up for a breather now," she said into the speaking tube.

'Thanks, Skip. Jeez, this was hard goin'!"

'I know. I owe you one."

'Ooh, you better believe you do!"

Chuckling, Joey maneuvered the Argo into the inlet, scouting ahead and soon seeing that she had been right about going to Hook Island - the entire inner part of the lagoon was one, large sandy beach that shone quite brightly in the increasingly murky conditions.

On both sides of the horseshoe-shaped inlet, heavy tropical vegetation reached down to the surface of the water, and to the north, a rocky ridge rose to nearly two hundred feet above it, creating a very cozy - and well-protected - cove against the storm.

Joey soon turned off the engines and let the Argo drift the rest of the way into the lagoon. Timing it perfectly, the forward motion stopped just as it came up to the far side of the lagoon where the darker color of the water gave away that it had a greater depth than the other parts.

With a flick of a switch, Joey activated the bow and stern anchors, and soon, a metallic rumble followed by two huge splashes proved that the anchor chains had deployed as they should.

"Ladies?" Joey said after knocking on the door post to Rebecca's cabin. Before she pulled the curtain aside, she sniffed the air for traces of vomit, but realized - to her great relief - that there weren't any.

'Come in, Skip,' Lana's voice said from the other side of the curtain.
Pulling the curtain aside, Joey stepped in and leaned against the bulkhead. "How are you holding up?" she said with an apologetic smile.

Getting up from the bunk, Lana quickly crossed the cabin and wrapped her arm around Joey's waist. "Oh, it did get kinda hairy there for a while… but we were cool as cucumbers, weren't we Rebecca?"

"We were… right down to the color," Rebecca said with a broad smile. Turning back to the chair, the secretary quickly put the final items into her travel bag and then zipped it all the way 'round.

Grinning, Joey pulled Lana closer to her and gave her a little squeeze. "Well, that's good. I was worried I'd have to put on my snorkel and my tanks just to get in here."

"Oh, ha ha. Just so you know, we didn't even consider throwing up," Lana said and poked the Skipper in the ribs.

"Good. Listen, we're going ashore in the dingy now, so you need to wear your lifejackets. Also, I think we'll probably be spending the night there, so if you have-"

"Whoa, wait a minute… spend the night there?" Lana said and took a step back. "On the island… where there's snakes and spiders and mosquitos and probably a few cannibals as well…?"

"Hook Island is uninhabited, Lana," Joey said with a grin.

"But you're not denying the rest?"

"Well, this is the Caribbean… you gotta expect to run into a few critters now and then."

"Ugh…"

"Anyway, we're leaving in five. Once you're packed, come to the rear deck. Olly is launching the dingy as we speak. Okay?"

"Okay, Skip. I'm ready now," Rebecca said and picked up her travel bag. "I better leave so you can snog in private," she continued, winking at Lana and the Skipper as she walked past them.

Pulling Lana closer to her, Joey said a brief "Thanks," and returned the wink. Once they were alone, Joey turned Lana around and held her at an arm's length. "Told her, did ya?"

"That we kissed? Yeah. Oh, pardon me, I didn't know it was a secret," Lana said, moved in very close and wrapped her arms around Joey's strong torso.

"Mmmm, it wasn't."

"We could do it again, couldn't we? I mean, just to prove that we actually did kiss…?"

"We sure could," Joey said and leaned down towards Lana's enticing lips. Closing her eyes, she let the fiery blonde take her mouth in a ravishing kiss that left her wanting much more than they had time for.

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"Are we ready?" Joey said five minutes later, balancing at the stern of the dingy while wearing a huge, ungainly, bright orange lifejacket.
Olly, clutching a cooler box with the supplies, just nodded, but Lana and Rebecca sent the Skipper an okay-sign with their hands.

"Okay then, off we go," Joey said and pulled the cord for the outboard engine. The Kawasaki purred to life at the second attempt, and soon, the dingy traveled across the seventy yards of slightly choppy water until it reached the sandy shore at the far side of the lagoon.

Turning off the engine and pulling the screw out of the water, Joey let the dingy run as far up on shore as possible so they wouldn't get their feet wet.

"Wow, it's over already… reminded me of the rides at Coney Island," Lana said as she jumped from the dingy, holding onto her travel bag. After putting down the bag at the top of the white beach, she ran back to the small craft and helped Rebecca ashore.

Once the dingy had calmed itself, Olly got up and wobbled over the edge of the rubber craft, balancing precariously with one foot in the dingy and one foot on dry land. "Oh, shit… help!" Olly said and let out a belly laugh when she realized she didn't have enough propulsion to clear the dingy.

Deciding that the involuntary balancing act was a bit too much of a good thing, Joey jumped out of the dingy out of turn and hurried up to help her first mate get the heavy cooler box safely ashore.

"C'mon, Olly, I got the box," Joey said, putting her arms under the heavy, cumbersome crate.

"Jeez, Skip… we better use all this stuff. What the hell did you bring?"

"Oh, we will, we will. Okay, I got it, I'm backing up now," Joey said and shuffled backwards across the sand until she had cleared the dingy. Turning around, she put down the cooler box on the beach and opened it to reveal a full load of soda cans, an unlabeled bottle of spiced rum, various equipment for the barbecue, a guitar and finally three plastic dinnerware boxes, one with six lbs. of sausages, the other with three lbs. of potato salad and the final one with the cutlery and little bags of mustard and ketchup.

Staring wide-eyed at the massive amount of food, Olly zipped her boiler suit down to half-mast and reached in to hold her fingers between her bare stomach and the fabric. "Okay, look at this, Skip… see how little room there is now? Wanna guess how little room there'll be once we're through that load?"

"We don't have to eat it all, ya know. It's just for all eventualities," Joey said and put the lid back on the box.

"Like what? That the world has gone under while we've been sitting out the storm…? Jesus, Skip!" Olly said and let out a new belly laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh all you like. I also got the satellite phone," Joey said and patted her breast pocket. "I had to leave my stogies behind… Lana doesn't like the smoke."

"Poor you. What's up with the guitar?"

"Well, once we get the barbecue going, I thought we might, you know, sing a couple of songs and stuff. Pass the rum… and stuff. You know."

"Wooing and Cooing, Skip?"

Chuckling, Joey shrugged and sent Olly a crooked grin. "Hey, we might as well get the most out of the situation, right?"
"Skip, did you plan this storm?" Olly whispered in a conspiratorial voice.

"Naw… but it worked out pretty good in the end. Hey, I think Rebecca is wondering what's keeping you," Joey said and nodded towards the secretary who was sitting on the beach with her legs folded up underneath her, looking out over the lagoon.

"Yeah, and Lana is looking suspiciously like she can't wait to get her fingers on you." - leaning in very close, Olly wiggled her eyebrows and whispered: "Or in you."

"Ah, shaddup Olly," Joey said and let out a cheesy snicker.

An hour later, the sausages were sizzling merrily on the barbecue, letting out the occasional pop and crackle that were matched in much larger scale by the thunderclaps that came from the storm cloud that was passing by a few miles to the south of Hook Island, and the creaking and groaning branches of the tropical vegetation around the lagoon.

Feeling calm and protected, Lana and Rebecca both sat between their partner's long legs; Lana leaning back against Joey's front, and Rebecca leaning forward to tend to the barbecue while Olly had her long, strong arms wrapped around her waist.

"God, this is life…" Lana said quietly as she looked at the smoke signals that rose from the barbecue. Sighing contentedly, she took a swig from her glass of Diet Coke and reached down to caress Joey's thigh.

Giving Rebecca a little squeeze, Olly leaned forward and rested her chin on the secretary's shoulder. "How are you holding up, baby? With the storm, I mean?"

"Just fine, Dominique. Just fine," Rebecca said and sent the mechanic a warm, wide smile.

"Mmmm. We're the luckiest women in the world," Olly said dreamily.

Rebecca and Joey both nodded at the undeniable truth of that statement.

"So, I think the sausages are done… who'll get the plates and the potato salad?" Rebecca said as she stabbed the nearest sausage with a fork.

"I'm on it," Lana said and scooted away from her warm backrest. Quickly moving over to the cooler box, she bent down and gathered up the plastic container with the potato salad without realizing that her shapely rear end was pointed practically straight up in an inviting gesture.

Olly and Rebecca noticed at once, and one of them let out a wolf call that caused both Joey and Lana to blush quite badly.

"Oh, grow up!" Lana growled, holding the potato salad.

"Wasn't me, Lana!" Olly said, and Rebecca quickly shook her head to show that it wasn't her, either.

"Uh-huh? Well, I don't think it was the Skipper… was it, Skip?"

"Nope," Joey said.
"Ha!"

"Maybe it was the Klabauterman," Olly said and began to look around like she was searching for something - or someone.

"Who?" Lana said as she popped the lid off the container.

Tightening her grip on Rebecca's waist, Olly began to speak in a voice half an octave deeper than her already rich timbre, "The spirit of the sea. He's not visible yet, Lana. Perhaps you'll meet him at the magic hour… when dusk gives way to night."

Lana blinked a few times and began to bite her lips. Turning to look at Joey, she hoped that the Skipper would say something reassuring, but when a visible shiver ran over Joey's body, it quickly transplanted itself onto Lana's. "Oh no, not ghost stories… not here, not on a deserted island…!" she croaked, almost dropping the long-forgotten potato salad.

Joey just nodded.

"Nooooo…" Lana whined, already dreading the dusk.

"Hey, are we gonna eat or what? Like I said three minutes ago, the sausages are ready!" Rebecca said, completely ruining the meticulously staged tension.

Breaking out into a laugh, Olly gave Rebecca a good squeeze and then reached down for her plate. "I'm ready, baby!"

"Oh you miserable, no-good sailors! Always trying to scare the stuffing out of us landlubbers with all your damned superstitions and tall tales!" Lana growled as she slapped a ladleful of potato salad onto Olly's plate.

Holding out her own plate, Joey laughed and blew Lana a kiss to make up.

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Once a good deal of the sausage and the potato salad had been consumed, a contented silence fell between the four women. Sensing that it was the perfect time for a little singing, Olly reached behind her and took Joey's guitar.

Putting the strap around her neck, she gave it a quick tune-up and then let it rest in her lap. "Any requests?" she said, laughing. "No, it wouldn't work anyhow. I only know a couple of songs… but I wanted to take the guitar first, 'cos once the Skipper's pipes come out to play, my stuff will just fade into the sand."

"Excellent… I'd love to hear you sing, Dominique," Rebecca said and ran her fingers up Olly's thigh.

"Whatcha gonna sing for us?" Joey said, still sitting with Lana resting against her front between her long legs.

"Oh, a little song that goes something like this… Blow A Gal Down."

"As I was a-walkin' down Paradise Street, Lord what did I see?"

A pretty young damsel I chanced for to meet
She was round in the corner and bluff in the lay
But I set all sails and cried "oh what the hey"

I threw out my hawser and took her in tow
And yardarm to yardarm away did we go

She said to me "Ma'am, will you stand the treat?"
"Delighted," says I, "for a charmer so sweet"

It was up in her quarters she piped me aboard
And there on her bed I cut loose with my sword

But just as me tonguey was forging ahead
She shouted "My wife!" and jumped out of bed

She was seven feet tall, had a chest like a horse
And right for my jawbone she plotted her course

She loosened my rigging, she kicked me in stays
I flew down the stairs like a ship on the ways

I chanced on a packet that happened on by
And when I awoke I was bound for Shanghai

So I'll give you fair warning before we belay
As Olly played the final sequence of notes, Lana began to clap and cheer. Putting two fingers in her mouth, she let out a whistle strong enough for a flock of birds to take off from one of the nearby trees. "Oh, that was too good, Olly!"

"Thanks, Lana. Hey, hon, did you think it was good, too?" Olly said, tickling Rebecca who was sitting with her hand across her mouth, having turned to a red-faced, human sculpture halfway through the performance.

"Uh-huh," Rebecca mumbled after a little while.

Laughing, Olly took off the guitar and handed it to Joey. "Give us all you got, Skip. Make it a good one 'cos I think the Gods are listening," the mechanic said, pulling Rebecca into a crushing embrace.

"Asleep in The Deep," Joey said and put the strap over her shoulder.

Lana quickly moved away so she wouldn't impede Joey's playing. Turning around, she folded her legs up underneath her on the blanket and leaned down to prop her head up on her arms, ready to be awed.

When Joey began to sing in a crystal clear mezzo-soprano, Lana felt her jaw go slack. The haunting words and the way they were sung hit her so hard that she teared up almost at once, and she felt herself falling head over heels in love with the gorgeous, blue-eyed, black-haired woman who had proved yet again that there was much more to her than met the eye.

'Stormy the night and the waves roll high,
Bravely the ship does ride,
Hark! while the lighthouse bell's solemn cry
Rings over the sullen tide.
There on the deck see two lovers stand,
Heart to heart beating, and hand to hand;
Though death be near, she knows no fear
While at her side is the girl most dear
Loudly the bell in the old tower rings,
Bidding us list to the warning it brings
sail or, take care
Danger is near thee,
beware, beware

Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep,
so beware, beware

What of the storm when the night is over
There is no trace or sign.
Save where the wreckage has strewn the shore
Peaceful the sun does shine.
But when the wild raging storm did cease,
Under the billows two hearts found peace
No more to part no more of pain
The bell may now tell its warning in vain.

Loudly the bell in the old tower rings,
Bidding us list to the warning it brings
sailor, take care

Danger is near thee,
beware, beware

Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep,
so beware, beware.'

By the time Joey’s voice died down and the guitar was lowered into her lap, the small party had grown silent; simply looking at the singer and at each other, all four women pondered the song’s haunting lyrics and how it related to themselves; pondered the dumb luck that had brought them together, their immediate future, and most of all, how a life without their chosen partner suddenly seemed impossible.
Sniffing quietly, Lana wiped her moist eyes on her sleeve. "God, that was beautiful, Joey..." she whispered, reaching out to put a trembling hand on the Skipper's thigh.

"Thanks," Joey said and took off the guitar.

Grabbing the bottle of Miguel's homemade rum, Olly unscrewed the cap and took a little sip. "Skip, I've told you before and I'll tell you again... if I had a set o' pipes like that, I would never have joined the Navy. I would've headed straight for Vegas and a million dollar contract."

"And like I tell you every time you say that, I only sing when the right mood hits me," Joey said and took the bottle Olly handed to her. Looking at the golden liquid, she sighed, but took a sip anyhow. "Anyway... drinks are on me."

"If you don't mind, I'd like a glass," Lana said and reached into the cooler box to find the glass she had used for her latest Diet Coke.

"Sure," Joey said and poured a little amount into Lana's glass. "Rebecca?"

"Oh, I... no thanks, Skip. I'll take another can of Fanta instead, if you don't mind."

"Doesn't bother me none," Joey said and took another swig from the bottle.

As the rum began to take hold, Joey parted her legs and patted her stomach, silently asking Lana to return to her comfortable nest. Lana didn't need to be asked twice, and she quickly got up from the blanket and sat down between the Skipper's mile-long thighs.

"So... the Klabauterman," Joey husked into Lana's ear.

"Oh no..." Lana whined, but Rebecca and Olly booed her and waved their hands at Joey to get her to tell a scary story.

Taking a deep breath, Joey closed her eyes and began to think back to one of the darkest times of her life. "I've seen him," she said in a quiet, somber voice. "And I've fought him. I so nearly lost my life. I felt his cold fingers on my chest, trying to seize my heart... my life. And to this day, I don't understand why he passed me by and took the man next to me instead."

As Joey spoke, Lana slowly began to realize - with a rising sense of horror - that the tale was true; that Joey Swain really had dueled with death. When the Skipper's voice trailed off momentarily, Lana held her breath, afraid of what would come next.

"We were on a live training mission in Norfolk... the objective was to attach three magnetic mines to the hull of a decommissioned ship, arm them and detonate them. There were six of us, five guys and me, working in teams of two. We were dropped from an insertion craft and swam the rest of the way into the harbor... a mile or so on the bottom. Nothing major. At first, the mission went well, but soon, it all fell apart," Joey said and took a swig of the rum.

"The water was too murky, the current was much stronger than the intel said it would be, my diving buddy's shielded flashlight stopped working... eventually, he fell back from the rest of us. By the time he found the target... I was carrying the mine, by the way... he was already exhausted from fretting about, but I knew we needed to get on with it. By sheer determination, my diving buddy and I completed the task by attaching the mine and arming it. Then we had to leave before it detonated."

"God, they really sent you out with a live mine?" Lana asked, holding her hands to her chest.
"Well, it didn't carry a big charge. Enough to… well, I'll get to that in a moment."

"Sorry."

"It's all right," Joey said and mussed Lana's hair. The smile on her lips soon faded as her mind returned to the murky waters. "Getting away turned out to be our biggest problem. My buddy was so tired from losing his directions going into the hot spot that we were lagging behind more and more going away from it… and then the mine detonated. We were too close and the shock wave hit us hard. I've never felt anything like it… it was like all my bones were ripped apart from each other and then put together the wrong way… it only knocked me out for a few seconds but my diving buddy wasn't so lucky. He lost consciousness and began to float downwards. I tried all I could to save him, but I wasn't strong enough to fight against his dead weight with all our equipment. We were rescued eventually, but… I survived. He didn't."

Staring into space for a little while, Joey eventually nodded to herself and took a long swig from the bottle of rum.

Pulling back from her dark thoughts, Joey suddenly realized that Lana was sobbing quietly in her arms. "Shit… I'm sorry for killing the mood," Joey said and mussed Lana's hair.

"I'm just glad that you're here, now…" Lana said between sobs.

"Mmmm. You want a bit more rum?"

"No, thank you. I'm dizzy as it is."

"Okay," Joey said, humming into Lana's hair.

Getting up, Olly dusted off her rear and moved over to Lana and Joey. "Skip, your story convinced Rebecca and me to get to know each other better… we never know when the show's over so we might as well get the most out of it while we're still here, right?"

"Uh, right…?"

"So I was thinking that we could toss a coin on who gets the warm spot by the barbecue…?"

"Oh… yeah, okay. Good thinking, Olly," Joey said and reached into her breast pocket to find a coin.

"Heads," Olly said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Which makes me tails," Joey said and flipped the coin in the air. Following it with her eyes as it came down on the blanket, Joey tapped Lana's shoulder.

"Yes?" Lana said, sniffing.

"I need your help. Which side is up on that coin there?"

"Tails."

"Shit!" Olly said out loud, punching the air.

"You're just gonna have to create your own heat, Olly. Ah, it's a warm evening. And the rain has stopped, so…" Joey said with a grin as she put the coin back in her pocket.
Returning the broad grin, Olly ran a hand through her short hair and began to play with her zipper. "Yeah, yeah… I guess we have to give it an extra heave-ho tonight to stay warm."

"Go on. I know you got what it takes, killer."

Chuckling out loud, Olly turned around and helped Rebecca up from the blanket. "Baby, we lost the coin toss… we just have to do it the old-fashioned way," she said and pulled the snickering secretary into a hug.

Lana briefly furrowed her brow, but when she recognized the unbridled look of lust on her friend's face, her cheeks grew red and she had to look down at the sand.

"See ya at dawn, Skip!" Olly said, shooting Joey a wave that the Skipper returned in kind.

"Bye, Lana! Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Rebecca shouted, giggling loudly.

"Have fun, Rebecca!" Lana said, suddenly feeling even more dizzy and knowing it wasn't just the rum influencing her. 'God… I wonder if… I wonder if… no. I better not get my hopes up. But I'm so happy for Rebecca… she really deserves it.'

Turning around, Olly and Rebecca gave each other a little kiss and then went hand-in-hand into the dusk, away from the barbecue site.

Once their friends were out of sight, Joey chuckled and mussed Lana's hair again. "Hey, Lana, would you mind if I got up now? My butt's going numb from sitting so long."

Shaking her head, Lana scooted forward and turned around. While Joey stretched her long legs and brushed the sand off herself, Lana's heart began to beat harder and harder in her chest. Looking at the Skipper cleaning up the camp site, Lana's mouth suddenly grew dry and it seemed to her that all her fluids pooled at a place due south.

A warm, pleasant tingle ran over her, but she forced herself to ignore it, like she had done so many times before in her adult life. "So… uh…" she said in a shaky voice that she didn't realize sounded quite different to what it usually did until Joey looked at her funny.

Putting the dirty dishes into a plastic bag in the cooler box, Joey cocked her head and looked at the blonde beauty who was still kneeling on the sand with an unreadable expression on her face. "Yeah?"

"So… are we going back to the boat, or…?"

"No, the sea is still too choppy," Joey said and looked out over the foam-topped waves inside the lagoon. "It wouldn't be comfortable for you."

"Oh… thank you. So I guess we'll spend the night here? On the beach?"

"That's the plan, yeah," Joey said and closed the lid of the cooler box. Dusting off her hands, she went back to Lana and sat down next to her.

The close proximity of the gorgeous woman wreaked havoc with Lana's body, and a split second later, she grabbed hold of Joey and tumbled onto the blanket, engaged in a kissing frenzy that surprised her just as much as the astonished Skipper.

"Whoa!" Joey said around a series of wet kisses. "I…" - kiss - "We…" - kiss - "Lana…!" - kiss - "Whoa!" - kiss - "Gawd you're…" - kiss - "…a good kisser, baby!"
Finally able to reciprocate the sneak attack, Joey turned Lana over onto her back and lowered herself down to claim the blonde's soft, enticing lips in a deep, searing kiss that caused untold pleasures for both of them.

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Three hundred yards further along the horseshoe-shaped beach, Olly threw down the blanket she had been holding and knelt onto the sand, inviting Rebecca to join her by zipping her boiler suit down to half mast.

"I'll be there in a sec, Dominique," Rebecca said, snickering loudly when she spotted Lana and Joey kissing frantically. "Look!" she said, pointing back at the original camp site.

"I guess you were right… they just needed some space. Hey, baby, I think what they're doing is called kissing. D'ya wanna try to see if we can do it as well? C'mon…"

Snickering again, Rebecca sat down next to Olly whose face and body had never looked prettier or sexier to the secretary. Moving closer to the dark-skinned woman, Rebecca reached up and pushed the boiler suit off Olly's shoulders to reveal her full bosom.

"You're so beautiful, Dominique…" Rebecca whispered hoarsely as she knelt down and claimed Olly's lips in a kiss that held promises of much more.

"Hell, look who's talking," Olly whispered back, nibbling at Rebecca's lips. "Let me help you with that," she continued, reaching up under the t-shirt and began to pull it off.

Stilling Olly's hands with her own, Rebecca moved away from the kiss and briefly looked towards the heavens. "No, wait… wait, please," she said, locking eyes with the mechanic.

"Okay…?" Olly said and moved her hands back down.

Sighing, Rebecca looked at Olly's perfectly sculpted body and then down at her own curves that she suddenly felt resembled a beached manatee. Not knowing what to say or do, she just rubbed her brow and leaned back on her thighs.

"Rebecca, if you're having second thoughts about making love, we can just cuddle all night. Falling asleep in the arms of a pretty girl is one of the best things I know," Olly said, gently running her fingers up and down Rebecca's arm to try to coax a smile out of the secretary.

"Well, I'm not, but… I just feel so dumpy," Rebecca said quietly.

"Dumpy? Nah. Not even close. You're round, yeah… but never dumpy."

Rebecca just shrugged, unsure of how to proceed, but when Olly began to nibble at her neck and throat, she couldn't hold back a sensuous moan that betrayed how much she wanted - and needed - to be thoroughly loved.

Moving in very close, Olly put her hands on Rebecca's back and pulled her tight. "Baby, I have a suggestion…" she whispered. "Lie down and let me make love to you. You are a beautiful woman from head to toe, and I'll prove it by loving every inch of you. I promise that I'll make you feel safe and comfortable… I promise that I'll do everything I can to make you come, again," - nibble - "and again," - nibble - "and again…"

Chuckling through a veil of tears that had suddenly appeared in her eyes, Rebecca kissed the side of Olly's head and then pulled back to take her t-shirt off. When the cool evening air hit her heated, super-sensitive breasts, the sensation was so strong that she felt a tingle race through her entire body and her nipples grow rigid almost at once.
Before long, the tingle came to a stop at her center that began to throb mercilessly, begging for some urgent attention.

"Dominique... I... please make love to me," Rebecca said and went to lie down on the blanket. Turning around, she unbuttoned her shorts and raised her hips to pull them off, but Olly put a hand on her thigh before she had time to do so.

"I got 'em, baby. That's my job," Olly said and quickly stepped out of her trademark boiler suit and her panties; her dark brown skin and strong, curvaceous body seemingly giving off an otherworldly sheen in the early dusk.

Moving forward, Olly pulled Rebecca's shorts off and leaned down to lay a string of little kisses on the inside of her thighs, going further and further up towards the skin-colored panties. Once she reached them, she placed a gentle kiss on Rebecca's heated center before hooking her thumbs inside the elastic band to pull them off.

Rebecca raised her hips again to ease Olly in her quest, but when the underwear had been removed, she felt so vulnerable that she couldn't stop a brief shiver from running down her body.

Noticing the shiver, Olly reached up to grab Rebecca's hands and give them a little squeeze. "Let's take it nice and slow, baby... there's no rush," she whispered and slid up Rebecca's body, kissing her ash blonde patch of hair, her stomach and both breasts on the way up to the secretary's waiting lips.

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Lana was panting heavily, lying flat on her back on the blanket and staring up into the bluish-black sky.

Next to her, Joey was lying on her right side with her head propped up on her arm, looking at Lana with lust shining brightly in her eyes - and not caring the tiniest bit what happened with the storm that was still raging further to the south of them.

When Lana's breathing evened out after a few seconds, she let out a chuckle and put her hands behind her head. "I'm sorry I kinda bowled you over there, Skip."

"Eh, I think I'll manage," Joey said with a throaty chuckle. When Lana didn't seem to want to go on, the Skipper let out a little sigh and snuggled down next to the blonde woman. "I get the feeling you have something on your mind, Lana...?"

"I do. Several things."

"Well... I'd like to hear them," Joey said, leaning in towards Lana.

Sighing, Lana moved her hands down from behind her head and put them across her stomach. Moments later, she sought out Joey's hand, giving it a little squeeze once the connection had been established. "I can't believe we've only known each other for forty-eight hours. It's Monday... we only arrived on Saturday, and yet, everything in my life has been turned upside down."

"In a good way, I hope?"

"Oh yes. And not just for me... look at Rebecca and Olly. Can you believe the passion going on there?"

"Yeah, that is hard to believe, I agree," Joey said and let out a brief chuckle.

"Joey? Have you and Olly ever... you know?"
"Mmmm. Once."

"And?"

"Well… it was pretty good, but we never pursued it. We were having financial problems at the time and I guess we both needed a friendly touch."

"Oh…” Lana said quietly.

"Does that bother you?"

"No… uh… not really. You're both adults."

Rolling over to her right side again, Joey put her arm across Lana's waist and gave her a little squeeze. "What's really bothering you, Lana? I know it can't be me and Olly sharing a roll in the hay two years ago…?"

Lana took a deep breath, but she let it out again without speaking. A little while later, she shrugged and mumbled: "You'll laugh."

"Oh come on… I'd never laugh at you, Lana!"

"I… I've been with a man, but never with a woman. I've never touched a woman intimately... never had a woman touch me in that way… never gone beyond kissing and a brief, embarrassing, semi-drunk, topless cuddle that didn't work for me at all. God, I'm a thirty-year old l-… woman who doesn't even know how… h-how to…"

"Lana, that's nothing to be ashamed of," Joey said in a quiet, soothing voice. Leaning down, she wanted to kiss Lana's lips, but at the last moment, Lana turned away from her.

"It is to me, Joey… Jesus, I'm so frickin' pathetic! I'm so afraid of my father finding out about me that I daren't even visit adult web sites on my own frickin' laptop!" Lana said and pounded her fist into the sand.

"Well…"

"That's why I've been so… so… Joey, you turn me on. You've turned me on ever since we first met in the harbor master's office two days ago!"

"Uh, okay," Joey said, looking at where her fingers had been zapped by the static electricity when they shook hands.

"But acting on my lust scares me shitless just thinking about it! Do you understand how frustrating that is?" Lana said and covered her eyes with her arm.

Getting up, Joey turned around and sat cross-legged on the sand, sending Lana a look that was a mix of love and sympathy. "You said you've been with a guy?"

"Yeah. Five years ago with a man I pretended was my boyfriend. Because my father is a big shot up in New York, it was… and still is, actually… expected of me. I don't know what the hell I was thinking, but he was there, and… we had sex a few times. God, I hated it so much."

"What'll happen if your father finds out that you're a lesbian, Lana?"

"…I don't know, but I get a knot in my stomach just thinking about it. He'll react badly, I just know it."
"Did you consider that he might be okay with it…?"

"He won't be. No chance. How did your Dad react, Joey?"

"Well… I guess he slapped me across the face and kicked me out on my ass."

"You see?" Lana said, shooting Joey a pointed look.

Sighing, Joey began to run her fingers up and down Lana's calf. "Yeah, but here's how I really see it… you are a woman who loves women. I say, act on it. If other people have problems with that, fuck 'em. Fuck 'em all."

"God, I… I want to act on it…" Lana said in a tiny voice.

"Then let's do it… to paraphrase something I read once, 'better to have screwed and lost than never to have screwed at all'."

Snorting loudly, Lana covered her eyes with her hands and let out a loud laugh. "God, you certainly have a way with words, Joey Swain!"

"Why thank you, darlin'," Joey said and used a very flamboyant gesture to flick her hair away from her shoulder.

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After making sure that Rebecca's lips were well-kissed, Olly slowly moved down the secretary's body, placing a line of kisses on her collarbones and the swell of her breasts.

Once she found Rebecca's nipples that were already standing to very strict attention, she lowered her mouth down onto the right one and began to suck very gently on it.

The deep moan that emanated from her lover-to-be told her that she was doing it right, and as she let her tongue flick over the hardened nub, she reached up to squeeze the other nipple between her thumb and index finger.

Engaged in her favorite pastime, Olly let her tongue run around the ring of small bumps at the base of Rebecca's pink nub, feeling the nipple grow even harder in her mouth.

When Rebecca let out a new moan that was even more passionate than the first, Olly closed her mouth on the right nipple and squeezed it very gently between her lips. As her goodbye present, she let her tongue dance slowly across the tip of the trapped peak before she opened her lips and slid over to the left breast.

Inside Rebecca, the fire grew each time Olly worked on her sensitive breasts, and it wasn't long before the flames pooled together to set her core alight. Moaning a soft "Oh, baby," Rebecca felt her hips move upwards of their own accord to gently press against Olly's firm stomach and her soft breasts.

For the first time in a very long while, Rebecca felt completely safe in the arms of a lover, and it allowed her to let go and grow bolder than she would normally be. "Baby… I need you a… a bit lower," she whispered, gently putting her hands on Olly's head and pushing it further down.

Olly caught on at once and left the two peaks behind. On her way down to Rebecca's glistening center, she made sure that every last inch of the secretary's skin was well-loved - like she had promised she would - by kissing and stroking the underside of her full breasts and her sides and stomach.
Laying down a line of little kisses and caressing the heated skin with her long, agile fingers, Olly eventually reached Rebecca's ash blonde patch of hair. Taking in the excited, musky scent of her lover, she paused and looked up, just to be sure that Rebecca wanted her to go ahead.

When Rebecca answered by whimpering and pressing her abdomen upwards, Olly resumed her slow descent by kissing the patch of hair before moving further down. A last-minute decision to move to Rebecca's round thighs instead of stopping at her center earned her an impatient groan, but Olly just grinned and concentrated on making sure that the soft, tender skin on the inside of Rebecca's thighs was well-loved.

"God, baby… don't stop now," Rebecca whispered, pulling Olly's head back up towards her highly sensitive rose.

Moving upwards, Olly opened her mouth and placed it over Rebecca's slick folds, appearing to devour her whole - then, she ran her tongue from the lowest part and all the way up the outer labia, stopping to give special attention to the swollen bud at the top.

When Rebecca felt her clit being pleasured by Olly's tongue, she arched her back off the blanket and let out a hoarse, breathless cry, not caring a damn bit who could hear her.

Pausing briefly to grin at her lover's reaction, Olly extended her tongue and went a bit further down to play around with Rebecca's folds, determined to fulfil her second promise - to make Rebecca come again and again.

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Lana sat up and pulled her legs up towards her chest, shielding herself, but at the same time, adding just the tiniest amount of pressure to her already quite sensitive center. "Will you show me how to do it, Joey? Will you show me how to make love to a woman?"

"Baby, do you even have to ask? First, we take our clothes off," Joey said and whipped off her Hawaiian shirt so fast that the center button went flying. Quickly kicking off her flip-flops, she began to pull the Bermuda shorts down, but then stopped. "Just tell me if I'm going too fast for ya," she said, wearing an impossibly cheeky grin.

Chuckling, Lana put her chin down on her knees, blushing slightly as she marveled over Joey's beefy upper body and full, but firm, breasts. "Oh, maybe just a little."

"Okay," Joey said and moved over to kneel in front of Lana's legs. With a gentle tap on the blonde's right knee, Joey convinced the shy woman to spread her legs to ease the access. "Right. First, we take off our shirts. Like this."

Reaching out, Joey pulled Lana's T-shirt up, doing it very slowly so she wouldn't accidentally tickle her. "Okay," Joey said, admiring Lana's moderately sized but perfectly shaped bosom. "Then we take our shorts off so we can get to the best place on Earth. I need you to work with me now, Lana."

Smiling goofily, Lana raised herself up which allowed Joey to pull her shorts down.

"Right. The best is yet to come," Joey said and whipped off her own Bermuda shorts, revealing that the pair of boxers she was wearing showed just how much she was looking forward to what was about to happen.

"Oh…” Lana said, staring at the damp patch at Joey's center.

Locking onto Lana's eyes, Joey reached down and began to fondle herself through the soaked boxers. "That's how much you turn *me* on, baby," she whispered hoarsely.
"Gawd…" Lana croaked, instinctively licking her lips. The physical evidence of Joey's excitement sent such a strong jolt through her that she thought she came right there and then.

Feeling her inhibitions short-circuit - and moving on an instinctive autopilot fueled by pure passion - Lana sat up and pushed Joey back. At the very last moment, she remembered that she was still wearing her panties, but she quickly reached down and tore them off.

Embracing Joey's strong torso with both arms, Lana mounted the Skipper's muscular thigh and began to rock back and forth, grinding her slick, swollen folds hard against the silky smooth skin.

Already panting quite hard, she buried her face in the nook of Joey's shoulder and began to moan rhythmically. The moans soon turned to groans that gradually grew in volume until they could be heard over most of the beach.

Riding Joey's thigh harder and harder, it wasn't long before Lana felt the orgasm begin to build within her. As her superheated skin was stimulated to such a point that she felt fully united with her strong lover, the fire seemed to seep back inside her, heating her up from the inside; building to such a level that she had no choice but to let herself be thrown over the edge and into Joey's waiting arms.

Unable to stop the grinding motion, Lana bucked hard and dug her fingers into Joey's strong back as the orgasm screamed through her, forcing her to throw her head back and let out a wild, sobbing cry that left her throat quite raw.

With the fire slowly leaving her system, she stilled her motions and let herself fall forward, sobbing quietly against Joey's broad, yet wonderfully female chest as the afterglow began to fall on her like a golden shroud.

Joey was so astonished - even gobsmacked - by the fiery passion that had emanated from her new lover that she hadn't had time to join her in the quest for pleasure, but Lana's explosive display certainly hadn't done anything to ease her own condition.

With a center that was throbbing mercilessly and practically begging for immediate action, Joey lowered the panting Lana down on the blanket and quickly slipped out of her soaked boxers. The simple touch and the chilly air that swept around her heated folds were nearly her undoing, but she willed herself into saving it for when she and Lana could do it together. "Baby, that was amazing..." she whispered as she knelt down next to Lana, running her hands over Lana's flat stomach.

Lana coughed dryly a few times but moved aside to let the Skipper find room next to her. Once the two women were side by side, Lana placed several deep, loving kisses on Joey's lips. "Thank you for letting me do my thing, Joey… I'm sorry you weren't in on it. I c-couldn't stop… I just c-c-" she whispered, still swirling around in her afterglow.

"Shhh, it doesn't matter. Lana…” Joey whispered back, grabbing Lana's arm. "But please… I need you… I need you now," she continued in a strained voice, lowering Lana's hand to her incessantly throbbing center.

"Oh…” Lana said once she realized what the Skipper wanted her to do. Suddenly feeling her own fire re-ignite, she slipped her middle finger down the length of Joey's slick folds, just barely allowing her fingertip to venture inside.

The response was immediate - Slamming her eyes shut, Joey let out a low, husky moan and began to push her abdomen against Lana's fingers to show that she was fully ready for her.

Lana didn't need a second invitation and carefully inserted first one, then two fingers into the Skipper's slick, burning hot opening. Once she had given Joey's inner muscles an opportunity to get used to the foreign objects, she began a slow, gentle, rhythmical grind that sent just as much pleasure through herself as it offered Joey.
Moving up towards Joey's mouth, Lana began to alternate between kissing the gorgeous Skipper and nibbling at her lips, her chin and her throat. When Joey responded favorably to a nibble at a spot under her right ear, Lana went in for the kill and began to work the spot without remorse, earning herself several long groans in the process.

Improvising - but going by what she liked herself - Lana slowly increased the tempo of the grind and added a few occasional twists that made Joey buck into her hand and let out a few moans. "Do you like it, Joey? Please tell me if you don't like it…"

"God… it's so good," Joey breathed, nodding vigorously.

When the Skipper's breathing became deeper and the color of her eyes changed from azure blue to a much darker color, Lana knew she was about to come, and she increased the tempo again to help her do it.

Suddenly Joey slammed her eyes shut and closed her legs, trapping Lana's hand and locking her fingers in a deep thrust; opening her eyes again a few seconds later, she stared directly into Lana's green orbs, binding their souls together as she rode the top of the wave.

Then they both came, literally in each other's arms. Both women moaned and bucked against the other; Lana drowning in the unexpected, thrilling orgasm and Joey simply hanging on for the ride.

Joey's first, wild orgasm gave way to a second, slower one that originated somewhere deep inside her and that rolled through her like a warm tidal wave, spreading a feeling of bliss through her entire system.

Finally relaxing - but still panting hard - she spread her legs and reached down to pull Lana's hand out of her. After slumping over bonelessly, she let out a few chuckles and buried her face in the nook of Lana's shoulder.

Lana couldn't quite understand how it was possible to come from someone looking at her, but she wasn't complaining. Instead, she pulled the edge of the blanket on top of both them to give their naked bodies some protection from the chilly air.

"Thank you for making a woman out of me, Joey," she whispered as she held onto the Skipper's firm - yet boneless - body.

"Thanks for making a mess out of me, Lana," the Skipper replied hoarsely a little while later, giving Lana a squeeze underneath the cover.

"Anytime, baby. Anytime," Lana whispered and broke out into a heartfelt, relieved chuckle.

'Oh… oh… oh… oh…! oh…! O-H-H-H-H!'"

Raising her head, Lana looked around in a confused daze to see where the moaning had come from. When she remembered that Rebecca and Olly were further down the beach, she lowered her head onto the blanket and let out a series of little chuckles. "That was Rebecca… wow… Gawd, she was loud!" she whispered, not quite believing that it was really happening.

When a deeper, but no less passionate, groan shot up the beach a minute later, Joey stirred underneath the blanket. "And that was Olly. Perfect score for the All Girl Team."

Lana, feeling like she was about to die of embarrassment when she realized that she had been just as loud herself, did what came natural to her and pulled the naked Skipper close so she could bury her blushing face in the tall woman's dark mane.
When the birds began to sing their exotic trills at first light - four forty-five in the morning - Lana sat up and yawned widely. Looking to her left, she quickly established that the Skipper was still snoring merrily, lying with her nose buried in the blanket and her two round, tanned butt cheeks pointing almost straight up.

Chuckling quietly, Lana pulled the blanket fully aside and began to scoop up the various clothing items she had thrown about haphazardly the night before.

As she put on her panties, a faint, musky whiff reminded her of how uninhibited she and Joey had made love, and almost at once, a glowing warm feeling bubbled up inside her, gradually spreading out to all her limbs.

Wanting to tell the world about what she and the Skipper had done, she scrambled to her feet and looked further down the beach to see if Rebecca and Olly were still sleeping, but soon realized that their two friends were slumbering peacefully.

On the blanket, Joey began to mumble in her sleep and seek her warm, human pillow that had suddenly left her. With her arm flapping about trying to locate her bedmate, she soon stirred and rolled up onto her right side. "Hey..." she said quietly once she had yawned so widely her jaw nearly fell off.

"Hey yourself, Skip," Lana whispered back.

"What time is it?"

"Very, very A.M."

"Ugh... go back to sleep."

"No, I gotta pee. I'll be back in a flash," Lana said as she put on her t-shirt and her shorts.

"Okay, but... ZZZZZzzzzzzz..." Joey said and rolled over onto her stomach.

"But?" Lana whispered, but the Skipper was already off to dreamland. "But... what...? Watch for hawthorns? Fire ants? Snakes in the grass?" she said again, looking at a row of bushes at the top of the beach. Since the matter was quite urgent, she shrugged and walked up the beach, pinching her legs together as she did so.

Upon her return, she noticed that the color of the early morning sky promised that the day would be nice and sunny, and also that the winds had died down completely. Thankful for not being in the direct path of the gale the previous day, she sent whichever deity was listening a quick thank you and then snuggled down next to Joey to snatch an hour or two more.

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As Lana woke up for the second time that morning an hour and fifteen minutes later, it was she who flapped her arm on the blanket to find her bedmate. Cracking open an eyelid when the search yielded nothing, she could see Joey speak with Olly, and Rebecca sitting on the sand next to the cooler box.
There was something odd about Rebecca, but in her sleepy state, Lana couldn't put her finger on what it was. Yawning widely, she smacked her lips and sat up on the blanket, scratching her morning hair.

When Rebecca noticed that Lana was awake, she got up and moved over to the blanket, walking on bare feet while holding her flip-flops in her hand. "Good morning, Lana," the secretary said and threw down her shoes on the sand.

"Morning, Rebecca," Lana said and shot her friend a look that spoke volumes.

"I know. Can you believe it?" Rebecca said a few seconds later, wincing from the brief sting that shot up from her well-loved privates as she sat down on the sand.

"Not really, quite frankly. Did you have a good evening?"

"I can safely say that I had the best evening of my life. And you?"

"Uh… you could say that."

"Good," Rebecca said and snickered.

Then it struck Lana - Rebecca looked a bit odd because she didn't have her hair in a bun. "Uhhh?" Lana said, touching her own hair to show what she meant.

Chuckling, Rebecca played with her loose hair and pulled it over her shoulders. "When I woke up, I began to fold it back like always… but then I thought… no. I don't want to do that anymore."

"Well, good for you."

"Yeah. Olly, she… God. She… she was able to bring out the best of me. I don't know how it's possible, but she was able to reach into my heart and just… oh, I can't put words to how I feel. She said she'd love every inch of me, and she did. I have never, ever had a lover who has done that. Lana, I…" - looking at Joey and Olly, Rebecca lowered her voice and leaned in towards her friend - "… I came seven times last night."

"God, Rebecca!" Lana said loudly, slapping her hands on her forehead and letting out a resounding laugh.

"I know! I kept thinking 'How is this possible?!' But it was. And for each one, it just got better and better. Today, I'm kinda sore…"

"I can imagine!"

"But, God, it was worth it…!"

Snickering like a couple of schoolgirls, Lana and Rebecca leaped into each other's arms and gave each other a strong, crushing, swinging hug that scared a few birds into taking off from their early morning nest.

Looking over her shoulder, Joey briefly observed the two hugging women but quickly turned back to Olly. "Did you get what you came for, Olly?"

"Holy shit, did I ever," Olly said with a broad grin. "Like I told you, Skip, us round girls can go all night and then some. And we did… and then some!"

Thumping her first mate's shoulder, Joey flashed her a shit-eating grin that quickly grew even wider when she looked back at Lana who was busy stretching the kinks out of her back.
"So…?"

"Yeah. We better get back on the Argo. I need some breakfast. Man, I'm hungry," Joey said and patted her Hawaiian shirt-clad belly.

"Well, there are still some sausages left…"

"Exactemundo, Olly. Bangers, bacon and eggs. And a cee-gar," Joey said, nodding.

"Boy, Skip, there's no hidin' you got lucky last night… you're speaking in slang," Olly said and broke out in a wide grin.

"Yeah, well, you know how it goes."

"Uh-huh! And more than once, too!"

"Oh, shaddup, Olly!"

When Joey felt Lana's hands around her waist, her first mate was long forgotten. Turning around, she leaned down and placed a warm, little kiss on the blonde woman's lips. "Thank you for last night," she whispered for Lana's ears only.

"Thank me? Thank *you* for last night, Joey! Yesterday, I had my second birthday… Once when I was born, and now here… with you," Lana said and straightened out the collar of Joey's Hawaiian shirt.

"Uh… okay. I guess that's good?"

"Oh, that's better than just good. When are we going to have breakfast? I'm so hungry I could eat a raw squid!"

"Ewww… how about sausages, bacon and eggs instead?"

"For… f- for breakfast?" Lana said and made a horrified face. "I w- was just joking… don't you have any cereal?"

Scratching her hairline, Joey looked down at the cooler box and the leftovers that she had been looking forward to having. "Uh, sure. Cornflakes and stuff."

"I'd much rather have that if you don't mind…!"

Lana's shiny Irish green eyes proved too much for the Skipper's defenses to cope with, and she let out a little laugh and a large nod that saved the day.

Twenty minutes later, Joey closed her Zippo and took a deep puff on her stogie, standing on the forward deck of the Argo so the smoke wouldn't bother Lana.

Taking in the last impressions of Hook Island, she found it very hard to believe how effortlessly the petite, outrageously cute blonde had been able to snare in her heart. It didn't take much for her to get an itch in her pants - the sight of a pair of wiggling hips alone could do that - but this time, it was completely different. This time, it really was her heart that was responding. 'Of course, it doesn't hurt that the sex was fabulous,' she thought and puffed on the cigar, letting out a chuckle and a matching pale gray cloud of smoke.
She let her eyes slowly glide across the horseshoe-shaped beach, thinking that she hoped she and Lana would be able to continue what they had started once they went back to St. Thomas. That thought brought along a slightly different - and a lot less pleasurable - feeling, one that reminded Joey of the fact that Lana would be leaving the following Saturday.

"Hmmm"-ing out loud, Joey knocked off the ash and turned around to go back to the bridge.

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"Olly?" Joey said into the brass speaking tube a brief while later.

'The pre-start check is complete, Skip. We're ready to go.'

"Excellent. Stand by."

'Standing by.'

After pushing two buttons on the control panel, Joey pulled the sliding window back to listen for the anchor chains being retracted. Once she was sure they were up and locked in place, she pressed the button to start the engines.

With the engines burbling merrily, she set the engine room telegraph to 'All ahead, slow,' and reached above her to pull the cord for the fanfare horns - not that there were any other boats in the vicinity that could hear it.

'All ahead slow, aye, Skip!' Olly said from the engine bay.

Spinning the wheel around, Joey soon had the Argo heading back towards the inlet of the lagoon. At the last moment, she realized that she hadn't warned Lana and Rebecca of the brief rolling that would follow as the boat would cross over the ever-disturbed surf, and she slapped her forehead at the thought of the resulting mess down in the pantry where her guests were still eating.

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Down in the pantry, Lana was shook a little bit by the engines starting, and she quickly scooted over to the nearest porthole to look out, still busy eating a bowl of Cornflakes - in low-fat milk - that had been spiced with chunks of strawberry.

"We're going now," she said around a particularly juicy strawberry.

Getting up, Rebecca took her glass of cool mango juice and shuffled over to her friend to look past her shoulder. "Mmmm. That'll take us across the surf in a little while. We better hang on to something."

"The surf?"

"Yes. You were nearly thrown off the bunk yesterday, remember?"

"Oh yeah... okay. Once we've done that, we better do the dishes... you know, to help Joey and Olly," Lana said and wolfed down the rest of the Cornflakes. Once she had put the bowl in the sink, she hurried over to the bench behind the melamine-plated table, sat down and grabbed hold of the table with both hands. "Okay, I'm ready for anything," she said with a cheeky gleam in her eye.

When the Argo finally did cross the surf, the tremors were so few and far between that Lana let out a groan of disappointment before getting up to go to work on the dishes.
Two hours later, Joey slowed the engines to a halt and came to a slow stop at the diving site she had chosen. Moving over to the plotting table, she tracked their route on the current chart with her left index finger while doing the same on the old map with her right. "Mmmm..." she said, scrunching up her face.

At their present location, four lines of text and a symbol of some kind had been squiggled on the old map, but no matter how hard Joey tried, she couldn't read what it said.

A little while later, Olly knocked on the door post to the bridge, wiping her sweaty brow with a rag. "Problems, Skip? You look like you've found a cat when you expected a dog...?"

"Well, no... but... shit, I can't read this, Olly," Joey said and tapped her knuckles on the old map. "Actually, that's what makes me think it's genuine. I mean, you've seen enough fake maps to know that on nine and a half out of ten, the writing is always perfectly legible, right?"

"Right."

"Well, this one isn't. I have no idea what it says there. I can't even see if the language is English or not. It's just a bunch of squiggly lines, almost like they've been written by someone drunk off his ass. Or her ass."

"Weren't too many women sailors back then, Skip."

"Naw, but it could've been copied by someone a sailor had met while in port."

"Good point. I doubt the prostitutes were too literate," Olly said and walked over to the plotting table to see for herself. "No, I can't read it either. We've traveled further east-southeast?"

"Yes. We're right here," Joey said and pointed at the same spot in the old as well as the new chart. "Well, whatever is down there, we'll take a look at it. I'll prepare the equipment... would you mind going below and alert Lana and Rebecca?"

"No problem, Skip," Olly said and swung the rag over her shoulder.

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"Rebecca? Yoo-hoo? Are you dressed?" Olly said, standing at the curtain in front of Rebecca's cabin.

'If I said no, would you wait outside or come in at once?'

"Oh, I'd come in, baby!"

'In that case, the door is open.'

"Excellent," Olly said and pulled the curtain aside to go in. When she couldn't see Rebecca anywhere, she furrowed her brow and moved to scratch her cheek - then she was assaulted by a pale white lightning that came tearing at her from behind the curtain.

Pushing the mechanic up against the bulkhead, Rebecca showered her with kisses - some deep, some playful - until they were both quite tingly and short of breath.
"Oh, baby…! We don't have time!" Olly said between kisses, trying to keep up with her new lover's boundless energy. "You're going diving in a little while, and I… uh…! Oh… Rebecca!"

"Awww… I thought you were here to have fun," Rebecca said, pulling back from Olly. A wicked smile played across her lips as she let her hands roam freely down Olly's boiler suit; sometimes on the outside, most often on the inside.

"Trust me, baby, if we weren't ready for the dive, we'd already be on the bunk, continuing where we left off last night," Olly said in a horny growl. Taking a deep breath, she slapped her cheeks a couple of times to get the buzz to leave her.

Sitting down on the bunk, Rebecca began to pull her T-shirt off, but then reconsidered. "Tell you what, Dominique… go wake up Lana. Once you've done that, you could… ah, come back and help me change into my swimsuit…?"

"Now that's definitely a deal, baby!" Olly said and hurried out of the cabin.

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"You're ready, Rebecca. See you below," Joey said after giving the air hoses and the valves on Rebecca's backpack a thorough check.

"Okay, Skip. I'll be waiting on the surface," Rebecca said and flapped over to the edge of the rear deck where she put in her mouthpiece. Crouching down, she let herself fall backwards and was momentarily out of sight of the others; then, she resurfaced and sent Joey an okay-sign.

Turning around, Joey flapped over to the bench and crouched down in front of Lana, a motion that made her neoprene suit squeak. "All right, Lana," she said and clutched the blonde woman's hands. "We've given you the rig with the two small tanks. You have plenty of air on this dive. Today, I won't leave you at all. I'll be right by your side at all times. If you feel even the slightest bout of panic come on, let me know at once and we'll abort, or at least go topside and take a breather. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks for taking care of me, Skip," Lana said quietly, wondering how she was able to feel Joey's warmth even through her neoprene gloves.

"You're welcome. After all, you're the one who's paying for the trip," Joey said with a wink.

Chuckling, Lana rose from the bench and flapped over to the edge of the deck. "Oh… of course. And all the times you were kissing me, you were really thinking about my signature on the dotted line, right?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Joey said as she prepared her mask. Growing serious, she checked Lana's hoses and valves thoroughly and gave her a pat on the shoulder when she was done. "You're ready. Wait until I'm back up," she said and put in her mouthpiece.

Giving the Skipper an okay-sign, Lana watched as the experienced diver slipped into the water only to bob back up a few seconds later. Rolling her shoulders to relax, Lana crouched down and let herself fall in.

The water was deeper at the new site than it had been at the other two, and the first thing through Lana's mind was that the storm had caused a lot of damage to the sandy bottom - then she realized that in this area of the Atlantic, the floor was rocky, not sandy, and she narrowed her eyes under her goggles as she took in the many outcrops and sharp edges that were waiting for her.
Joey and Rebecca quickly joined Lana, and soon, the three divers swam towards the starting point of the four-legged search pattern Joey had drawn up for them.

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After the first leg had yielded nothing, Joey held up her hand in the stop-sign and then touched her oxygen gauge. Quickly assembling around the experienced diver, Lana and Rebecca checked their air supply, both finding that they were good for a while longer.

Nodding, Joey reached into a pouch on her utility belt and produced a waterproof map that she held up for the others to see. While she had been preparing for the dive, she had drawn four fat, red lines on the map, dividing the site into three wedge-shaped zones that she wanted to follow as closely as possible.

Tapping her index finger on the first waypoint, she pointed upwards at the underside of the Argo, and then down at the map. Moving her finger along the first red line, she pointed at the ocean floor when she reached the second waypoint, earning herself two okay-signs.

Returning the okay-sign, Joey folded up the map and put it into the pouch. As soon as she had done that, she began to swim towards the third waypoint, moving quite slowly so that her two rookies could keep up.

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Two-thirds of the way to the third waypoint, the three divers were joined by a large shoal of colorful, tropical fish that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. As the fish realized they had come too close to possible enemies, they darted off in all directions, going over, under and between the divers.

Rebecca followed the colorful fish with her eyes, marveling at the variety of life found at the bottom of the sea. Trying to be as still as possible so she wouldn't spook the fish too badly, she only used slow, deliberate movements to hover in place.

When the fish disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared, Rebecca noticed that Lana and Joey were waiting for her twenty yards ahead. As she flapped her swim fins to set off, her eyes caught something shiny below, lodged in between two rocks.

Quickly holding up her hand in the stop-sign, she dove further down to investigate. She initially thought that it could be another fun but essentially worthless trinket like the spoon the Skipper had found earlier, but when she began to brush a few strands of seaweed off the object, she could see that it was much larger.

At first, she wasn't able to dislodge it, but when she changed tactics and began to remove a few of the rocks it was under instead, she was able to wiggle it loose from its prison.

Suddenly realizing what she held, Rebecca yelled underneath her mouthpiece and began to breathe quickly, sending a string of bubbles up from her position - in her hand, she was holding a whole, but slightly warped gold dinner plate.

Once Joey and Lana arrived at the scene, it didn't take the experienced diver two seconds to recognize the object, and when she did, all thoughts of telling Rebecca off for using the wrong hand signal instantly flew out of her head.

Swimming around Joey, Lana caught her first glimpse of the gold dinner plate, and her eyes popped open in a very wide stare behind her goggles. Clenching and unclenching her fists excitedly, she began to breathe quicker and quicker, causing her air flow regulator to occasionally break into the red.
Joey noticed and put up her hand in the stop-sign. Quickly checking her own air supply - she was down to fifty percent - she pointed at her fellow divers, instructing them to check their oxygen gauges.

Unfortunately, neither Rebecca nor Lana had time to pay attention to Joey; both were too occupied with scanning the floor for more shiny objects to notice anything.

Feeling an uncharacteristic burst of anger bubble up inside her, Joey knew that it was time to push her good manners to a side for once and make the two rookies aware that they had overstepped the line. Racing over to Lana, she moved directly into the blonde's line of sight, grabbed onto the petite woman's shoulders and showed her a thumbs-up signal that she couldn't possibly ignore.

Understanding that she had made a very bad mistake, Lana gulped underneath her mask and began the ascent to the surface. Moments later, Rebecca followed her upwards.

Once the three divers resurfaced, Joey tore out her mouthpiece and shot her two fellow divers a hard, angry stare that made them both feel like they were back in elementary school. "Ladies," Joey growled. "When we're below, you pay attention to me and you do as I command! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Skipper," Rebecca mumbled sheepishly. Lana just nodded.

"Good. Now let me see your oxygen gauges!"

"Yes, Skipper."

Taking a close look at the two gauges, Joey's fears were confirmed when they read far too low values. "Thirty percent remaining, Rebecca. Back to the Argo with you. Lana… nineteen percent! Didn't you notice your gauge going into the red? No? You damn well should have!" Joey barked, bobbing up and down in the water.

"Yes, Skipper," Lana said quietly, having pushed her mouthpiece to the side. "I'm sorry. I just got excited…"

Hearing Lana's despondent voice took the edge off Joey's anger, and she decided to cut them some slack. "All right. Lesson learned. Right?"

"Yes, Skipper," Lana and Rebecca said as one.

"All right. I'll mark the spot on the GPS and then it's back to the boat for a top-up."

"We actually found a gold dinner plate," Rebecca said, lifting the plate out of the water.

"I noticed. Good work," Joey said, adding a little smile to defuse the worst of the harsh words. "Come on. Off we go," she said and moved to put her mouthpiece back in, but before she had time to do so, Lana put a hand on her shoulder.

"Joey… I'm really sorry. I hate it when I let people down."

"Like I said, Lana, I hope you learned a lesson here. You didn't let me down… but you need to pay attention to what I'm doing. Your life could depend on it," Joey said and returned the little squeeze.

"I understand. It won't happen again."

"That's all I'm asking. Come on, let's get our tanks topped up."
Not long after, Olly clicked a fresh, full tank on Joey's harness and gave her a quick slap on the butt. "You're good to go, Skip."

"Thanks, Olly. Any news on the radio while we've been away?"

Olly narrowed her eyes slightly and looked towards the bench where Lana and Rebecca were studying the gold dinner plate very closely. "Yeah," she said quietly, pulling Joey with her onto the starboard side path so they were out of earshot of the others. "Not long after you went down, the harbor master at Charlotte Amalie sent out a PAN-PAN Overdue Vessel alert to all ships in the vicinity."

"Shit… who?"

"The Ginny Tonic."

"Fuck…" Joey said quietly, rubbing her chin.

"Apparently, they never made it to the British Virgins last night. And no sight of them so far today."

"Mmmm. I'm not the world's biggest fan of Larry Pickett, but he had several tourists with him. Canadians, I think. Have you scanned the area?"

"Yeah, more than once. A couple o' thorough sweeps of the entire horizon. Saw a sailing ship a few miles out, but nothing apart from that. Hailed 'em on the radio but they hadn't spotted anything, either," Olly said, absentmindedly playing with her zipper.

"Okay. Well, there's nothing we can do about that. We're roughly following the course Larry took when he left us last night. Perhaps we'll run into some debris…" Joey said in a voice that slowly trailed off. "Well. Let's hope we'll find him and his guests in one piece, instead," she said after a brief pause.

"Yeah. Okay, let's get back to the fun stuff," Olly said and pushed herself away from the side of the bridge.

As Joey came back to the rear deck, Lana could see at once by the dark look on her face that something had happened. Taking off her swim fins, she got up and quickly closed the distance between them. "What's wrong, Joey?"

"The Ginny Tonic is missing."

"The Ginny…? Oh…! The boat we met yesterday? The fishing tour operator? The one I almost chose-" Lana said, putting her fingers across her mouth when she realized where her thoughts were taking her.

"Yes," Joey said with a deep sigh. "Everett, the harbor master, sent out a PAN-PA… uh, sort of like a Mayday, only the other way 'round and not as severe… anyway, they sent out an Overdue Vessel alert, that means that the ship hasn't arrived at the destination and it hasn't contacted the harbor master with an alternative route or port, either."

"Oh, God. The storm…"

"Probably. Ah, Larry is an experienced seaman. He's a big pain in my ass, but he knows what he's doing. I'll bet he's found a safe harbor somewhere and just forgot to radio it in," Joey said with a shrug.

Lana - clearly not convinced that she shouldn't be worrying - just nodded and let out a quiet "Mmmm."
"Lana, let's not dwell on the bad stuff… let's take a look at what you found," Joey said and put her hand on Lana's shoulder to turn the two of them around. Walking back to the bench and Rebecca who was playing with the gold plate, Joey pointed at the prized object. "That's something you don't see every day. That looks genuine… I wouldn't be surprised if it has a market value of a thousand dollars or more. And it's all yours."

"No, it's Rebecca's. She found it," Lana said, giving her friend an okay-sign that Rebecca promptly returned.

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Fifteen minutes later, all three were back in the water, swimming down towards the point Joey had marked into the underwater GPS device. Once they were at the site, Joey began to swim around in ever-expanding circles, the best way to search a narrow area.

It didn't take long for Lana and Rebecca to catch on, and soon, all three were swimming in a little cluster with their eyes glued onto the ocean floor.

They continued that way for the better part of ten minutes before Joey's keen eye caught a glimpse of something shiny hiding inside a small cove created by two rocks balancing against each other. The object was mostly buried in a tuft of seaweed, but it was clear to see that it had recently fallen down from a crack between the two rocks.

Holding up her hand, she pointed downwards at the shiny object.

Lana and Rebecca reacted at once, both feeling excited but remembering the lesson they had learned earlier in the day. Looking at each other, they reached out to thump each other's fists before following Joey down to the bottom.

The shiny object proved to be a gold cup with most of the foot missing and a large dent in one side. When Joey tried to wiggle it free, it just dug down even further below the nearest of the two balancing rocks.

Joey momentarily moved back to come up with another solution, but Rebecca wanted to try the approach that had worked when she had found the gold dinner plate, and began to wiggle the cup around.

Without warning, the first rock tumbled off its platform and trapped Rebecca's arm underneath it, making her scream in pain and terror underneath the mask that sent a large plume of bubbles towards the surface.

Lana just stared in wide-eyed shock at her friend, but Joey sprung into action at once and began to feel around the rock, trying to lift it off Rebecca's arm. Even using all her strength, she was only able to get it to move a few inches, but it wasn't enough for Rebecca to pull herself free.

Joey could see by the secretary's increasingly frantic movements that she was close to going into a panic and quickly swam around the other side of the rock to try to push it up instead. Turning around to put her back into it, she could see that Lana was just hovering passively in the water with her arms wrapped around herself.

Lana stared at the gruesome scene, wishing she hadn't come up with the idea of a scuba adventure at all. She felt so bone-numbingly cold that all her muscles began to jitter, and if she hadn't worn a mouthpiece, she was sure her teeth would have chattered in her mouth as well. Feeling helpless and petrified, she didn't notice Joey waving at her until the third time.

Snapping out of her fear, Lana quickly swam closer and moved in to be next to Joey and Rebecca. The experienced diver sent out a string of hand signals that went by so fast Lana could only pick up one in three, but she eventually understood that she should help Rebecca get free while Joey lifted the rock.
Swallowing down a rising tide of bile, Lana moved in very close and took hold of Rebecca's trapped arm. As she brushed past her friend's body, she could feel that it was racked by sobs, something that hit her like a kick in the gut.

Lana forced herself to concentrate on Joey's actions, but she found it hard going when a veil of tears began clouding her vision. Blinking furiously to see through her tears, she wished she could remove her goggles, but at the same time, she knew it would only make matters worse.

When Lana spotted Joey move herself underneath the rock to use the ocean floor as her base, her heart leaped into her throat and sent new waves of cold jitters through her already numb muscles. 'God, no… Joey… oh, God, please be careful…!' she thought, feeling a panic begin to creep up her spine.

Joey filled her lungs with air and bit down hard on the mouthpiece. Closing her eyes, she put the rock across her shoulders and pushed upwards. Little by little, the slab of stone began to creep backwards, releasing Rebecca's arm inch by frustrating inch.

Finally, Rebecca's arm was out in the open and Lana pulled it back at once - tenderly, but decisively.

The hard work kicked up a lot of bubbles from the three divers and the rocks, but more worryingly, the bubbles of air were soon joined by a steady flow of blood from Rebecca's arm that tainted the waters around them.

As soon as Joey saw Rebecca and Lana float away, she let go of the rock, feeling the neoprene fabric across her shoulders get torn off as the large slab fell harmlessly to the ocean floor. Panting hard, she needed a few moments to gather her wits, but then she swam over to her two fellow divers.

The wound on Rebecca's arm wasn't too bad - just a seven-inch long gash, really - but the amount of blood in the water gave Joey plenty of cause for concern. She knew that sharks had a sixth sense for when a potential prey could easily be defeated, and the situation they had involuntarily found themselves in would be like a smorgasbord for some of the more intrepid of the great hunters.

Quickly showing Rebecca and Lana two thumbs-up signs, she took Rebecca's good arm over her shoulder and helped the unfortunate diver upwards, ignoring the stinging pain that spread out from the cuts and scrapes she had received herself.

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Resurfacing, Joey quickly pushed her mouthpiece and her goggles to a side and began to examine Rebecca's cut arm. Like she had already seen, the wound wasn't too bad, but it definitely required medical attention. "Rebecca, please listen," she said to the sobbing woman.

"O… okay," Rebecca said between sobs, trying - but not quite succeeding - to nod calmly.

To Lana, Rebecca's red eyes and pasty white hue was a stark reminder that the open sea wasn't something to take lightly. Pushing her own mouthpiece aside, she felt a strong need to throw up, but she forced herself to keep it down for the time being by clamping her jaw shut.

"Rebecca, are you hurt anywhere else? I need you to tell me if you feel pain anywhere other than your arm?" Joey said very slowly and deliberately to try to add some calmness to the intense situation.

"N-no… No, just m-my arm…"

"All right." Looking back, Joey could see that they were more than two hundred and fifty yards away from the Argo. Cursing under her breath, she turned back around to begin the slow return trip.
As the Skipper turned around, Lana suddenly noticed the tears and the row of bleeding scrapes across her broad shoulders, and she couldn't stop a choked-up whimper from escaping her lips.

"Lana? Are you all right?" Joey said, holding Rebecca in a firm but tender grip.

"Y-your shoulders… your shoulders, Joey! You're cut… you're bleeding pretty b-badly!"

"I know. I'll have to deal with that later," Joey said though clenched teeth.

Treading water, Lana began to think fast - or at least as fast as her muddled brain would allow her to. "Joey, wait… I'll… I'll swim back to the Argo and get Olly to come out with the dingy! W-wouldn't that help?"

Sighing deeply, Joey thought about it for a few seconds. "Yeah," she said with a faint nod. "But don't take any chances! Yell as soon as you feel your strength go. Olly will hear you," she continued in a stern voice.

"I know. I've always been a good swimmer!" Lana said and put her mouthpiece back in.

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Sitting in the Captain's Chair on the bridge with her feet up on the plotting table, Olly was reading an old instruction manual when a feeling that something had gone wrong suddenly began to churn in her gut.

Flipping the page and chewing on her cheek, she tried to ignore it at first, but when the feeling only grew stronger, she put down the manual and took the binoculars.

She didn't even make it to the rearward-facing windows before she could see a solitary head in the water swimming towards her. The diver wore a black hood, meaning that it was Lana and not the Skipper or Rebecca - zooming in, she could see that she had guessed right.

The bad feeling in her gut suddenly exploded into an all-out fiery inferno when she realized that Lana's face was contorted in desperation. Raising the binoculars, she whipped it around to try to find Joey and Rebecca, but in her upset state, she wasn't able to locate anything other than Lana's head on the surface of the water.

Letting out an impressive blue streak, Olly quickly put down the binoculars and jumped down from the bridge. It didn't take her more than a few seconds to kick off her boots and strap her lifejacket onto her boiler suit, and then hurry down to prepare the dingy.

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Stopping to catch her breath, Lana looked up at the hectic activity on the Argo and realized that Olly had already seen her. Leaning back in the water, she pulled out her mouthpiece and began to pant hard, seeing black spots in her vision after swimming faster than she ever had.

Half a minute later, Olly slowed the dingy to a stop next to her and helped her crawl up into the rubber craft.

"What's happened?!" Olly said in an agitated tone Lana had never heard the sturdy, usually so unflappable mechanic use before.

"Reb… Rebecca was trapped under a rock… her arm… they're… two hundred yards back!" Lana said, struggling to speak clearly through her panting. Reaching down, she wanted to take off her swim fins to fit better into the bottom of the dingy, but realized that she might need to go down again to help give her injured friends a push.
Looking up, Olly suddenly spotted two heads bobbing up and down; one ash blonde, one black. Seeing her lover and her best friend in trouble made her stomach perform a series of flip-flops, but she forced herself to be calm and reached behind her to pull the cord for the starter.

Another thirty seconds later, Olly slowed to a stop next to the two struggling divers. Spotting the bleeding injuries, she knew that they had been very lucky indeed not to attract any sharks, and as she reached down to grab Rebecca's hand, she thanked all the Gods that would listen for keeping an eye on her sweetheart.

"C'mon, ups-a-daisy, Rebecca… come on, I've got ya," Olly said and put out her arm, but Rebecca's weight and bulk counted against her and made her unable to climb aboard on her own, making her groan in frustration.

Seeing that her friend needed help quite badly, Lana quickly put her mouthpiece back in and let herself fall backwards over the edge of the dingy. Staying below the surface, she grabbed hold of Rebecca's legs and butt and gave her the push she needed to get up, thrusting herself downwards in the process.

Once Rebecca was safely inside the small craft, she tore off her goggles and her mouthpiece and broke down, sliding onto her knees at the bottom of the dingy and letting out a series of sobbing wails that made her body shake.

The sound of Rebecca crying cut through Olly's soul like a jagged knife, but the code of the sea meant that she had to help those in the water before she could comfort her - however, when she leaned back over the edge to pull Joey inside, the Skipper just gave her a dismissive wave.

"She needs you, Olly," Joey said, clinging onto the rope that ran around the craft. "I can get up on my own… don't worry about me."

"Okay," Olly said and turned around. Kneeling down, she put her arms around her lover's body and pulled her into a heartfelt hug; whispering soothing words into her ear that she hoped would ease some of the pain.

Lana soon resurfaced next to Joey and shot the Skipper a few tender looks through her goggles. With a heave-ho, she got herself up into the dingy and put out her hand to get the Skipper up as well.

When all four women were resting safely in the small craft, Joey let out a deep, trembling sigh that was a precise reflection of what they all felt. Shocked to see tears in the usually so tough mechanic's eyes, Joey understood that the treasure hunt had been a life-altering experience for all of them - and also that they had been more than a little lucky that the extent of their injuries had only amounted to a gashed arm and the scrapes across her own shoulders.

Shaking her head slowly, she crawled back to the stern of the dingy and lowered the engine into the water to start the short journey back to the Argo.

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CHAPTER 8

Fifteen minutes later, Olly pulled one of the white bathrobes over Rebecca's nude shoulders after she had showered on the forward deck to wash the salt off her body and her suit. "Are you comfortable, baby?" she said quietly, folding down the terrycloth collar.

"Yes… thank you, Dominique."
"You're welcome. Let's take it really easy… it's time to go below and get the wound cleaned and dressed… one step at a time," Olly continued, holding the secretary in a very tender touch as the two women walked back along the port side path to get to the stairs.

Inside the bridge, Joey sat the wrong way around on a chair Lana had brought up from the pantry. She had stripped out of her ruined neoprene wetsuit and was sitting topless while Lana treated her wounds, but that was the least of her concerns. Grumbling severely, she couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

"Oh Joey, does it hurt that much…?" Lana said, taking a step back after Joey had let out an impressive curse.

"What? Oh… no. I'm just pissed off about the whole thing. Go on, you're doing fine," Joey said over her shoulder.

"Okay. But please speak up if it hurts."

"Oh, don't worry. I will."

The wounds had already been largely cleaned by the shower the Skipper had had when she got back onboard the Argo, but Lana still ran across the cuts and abrasions with an antiseptic swab to make sure that she wouldn't miss anything. "Four… five… six… seven… eight… nine… Jesus, nine scrapes, Joey… Nine!"

"How deep are they?"

"It varies. Three of them are only superficial, but at least two are kinda deep. The rest are sort of in between."

"Kinda deep? Sort of in between?" Joey said with a chuckle.

"Well, I'm sorry… I'm not a nurse. Usually, I can't stand the sight of blood. It's a miracle I haven't passed out already!" Lana said and put her hands on her hips.

"Mmmm. Okay. Are they clean?"

"As clean as they can be, yes."

Pushing herself back, Joey got up and turned around, giving Lana a clear, unrestricted view of her full, firm breasts. "Thanks for your help, Lana."

"Uh… buh…!"

"What? Oh. Sheesh, you big city girls," Joey said and let out a chuckle. Taking her indispensable Hawaiian shirt, she folded it up and wrapped it around her chest to cover herself up. When she couldn't reach behind her to tie a knot on it, she just held the shirt to her bosom and turned around again, hoping that Lana would buy a clue.

Lana did - eventually - and quickly tied a knot on the shirt.

"Is that better?" Joey said, testing the resilience of the knot by wiggling her chest left and right.

"Much," Lana said, nodding. "Ahem. Anyway, I presume we need to get back to Charlotte Amalie now?"

Sitting down on the Captain's chair, Joey reached over to the plotting table and took a cigar and her Zippo. "Oh, yes. We can only do so much for Rebecca here. She needs to have her arm x-rayed," she said, putting the cigar in her mouth. "We fooled death today, Lana. That's one of the ground rules I didn't mention. Never gamble with the Reaper… it's a bet you just can't win."
"Mmmm," Lana said, thinking back to the underwater drama - and once again breaking out into a shiver when she remembered the way Rebecca's body was shaking from her silent sobs.

"Mmmm," Joey echoed, lighting her cigar. "No, we're going back. Besides, I only had one wetsuit."

"When we get back to port, I'm going to call my Dad," Lana said quietly, making Joey spin around and shook her a puzzled look. "Oh… no, I don't mean that I want to return home to New York already! No, no, no… but I need to tell him about Rebecca's accident. It could mean that she'll need a couple of sick days. She's his lead secretary," she continued, discreetly waving her hand under her nose to dissipate the smoke.

"Oh. Okay."

With her thoughts returning to the gold cup they had found, Lana sighed and ran a hand through her damp hair. "I can't believe we didn't even get the cup we found… after all that, and we didn't even get the damn cup!"

"It wasn't in good shape, Lana. There was a large dent in it and the foot was completely missing."

"No, but… we did find it. Well, it's still down there. I guess we could always come back for it later. Have you marked it on the GPS, Skip?"

"Yep," Joey said, pointing her thumb at the electronic device that she had placed on one of the window sills. "The exact position is marked and locked in."

"Good. I can-"

Before Lana could go further, she was interrupted by Olly who knocked on the door post. "I'm ready to go through the pre-start checklist, Skip."

"That's good, Olly. How's Rebecca?"

"Banged up. Scared," the mechanic said somberly. "But mostly all right. The wound wasn't as bad as it looked at first sight. I've wrapped it up pretty good, but we definitely need to get it checked when we get back."

"Lana and I have just discussed that. Okay, you can get started on the checklist now if ya don't mind. I'll fire up the radio to hear if they're still sending out the PAN-PAN for the Ginny Tonic," Joey said and got up from the chair.

"I'm on it, Skip," Olly said and went down the stairs to get to the hatch,

"And I'll go downstairs and comfort Rebecca. But first," Lana said, stood up on tip-toes and placed a sweet, little kiss on Joey's cheek, "you need a kiss. Thank you for saving Rebecca down there, Joey. I can't stand thinking about what would have happened if you hadn't been as strong as an ox."

"You're welcome, Lana. We would have found a solution somehow. I'm sure of it," Joey said and mussed Lana's hair.

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Four hours later, Lana nodded a brief Hello to the door man at the Long Bay Resort Hotel. Walking through the clean, cool, slightly impersonal lobby was a night-and-day experience from the cramped, yet cozy, atmosphere aboard the Argo, and Lana found herself wishing that she could have remained there - at least for a little while.
After she had put her travel bag into her own suite, she went next door, unlocked Rebecca's suite with the keycard she had loaned - Rebecca and Olly were at the Doctor's - and opened the French doors to get a bit of fresh air inside.

Lana didn't want to pry around in Rebecca's travel bag so she just left it on the bed before going back to her own suite.

Sitting down on the chair at the small desk, she briefly played with the fountain pen and the stack of writing paper, thinking how unusual it was for her to have taken several showers without drenching herself in makeup and perfume immediately afterwards. Chuckling, she sniffed her armpits to check if her natural, clean scent had been overpowered by sweat. When she realized that it had, she made a beeline for the bathroom, a new shower and her trusty roll-on deodorant.

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Once she felt fresh again, she sat down at the desk and picked up the receiver of the suite telephone that had been designed to look like something from the 1950s.

"Hello, reception?" she said after pressing zero like she was used to from her own apartment complex, but when the line was dead, she realized that she shouldn't have done it and hung up. Trying again, she just lifted the receiver and put it to her ear.

"Hello… reception? Hello?"

'This is the reception, Miss. How may we help you?' a young, female voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Oh, hello… I couldn't quite figure out how it worked, but… uh, never mind. I'd like to know if I can call New York City on this phone?"

'Not directly, but if you give me the number you wish to reach, I can patch you through.'

"Oh! Excellent… okay, it's 555-9987," Lana said and leaned back in the chair. Mirroring one of Joey's favorite positions, she put her legs up on the corner of the desk and lounged even further back in the chair.

'The number is ringing, Miss.'

"Great. Thanks!"

'You're welcome, Miss,' the telephone operator said, followed by a few electronic clicks, hisses and dings that Lana thought meant that the operator had moved out of the loop.

'The office of Alfred Ferguson,' a strong female voice suddenly said at the other end of the line.

Recognizing the voice at once, Lana broke out in a wide smile. "Hi, Mrs. Coogan! It's Lana Ferguson calling from St. Thomas! Can I speak to my father, please?"

'Oh, hello, Miss Ferguson. Of course. Please hold.'

"I'm holdin'!"

'Alfred Ferguson speaking. Hi, sweetheart! How are you? How are things going on your grand adventure?'
Even though her father's voice was friendly, the mere sound - and the thoughts Lana associated with it - made her take her legs off the desk and sit up straight. Sighing over her insecurity, Lana ran a hand through her damp locks. "Oh, hi Daddy! I'm just fine, thank you. Things are going really well down here… mostly. Rebecca has had a little accident. She's fine now, but she's hurt her arm a little bit."

'Oh, dear! What happened? Was it because of the sailors' negligence?'

Narrowing her eyes dangerously, Lana stared at the receiver, wanting to give her father the real story - but knowing that it would probably be the end of her privileged life if she did so. "Oh, no, Daddy… it was an accident at the bottom of the sea. We saw a gold cup that we wanted to get, but there was a rockslide that trapped Rebecca's left arm. She's at the Doctor's now with Ol… I mean, with Dom Hofstaedter."

'Oh. Have the sailors been behaving themselves? They haven't tried anything frisky with you or Miss Stern, have they?'

Once again staring at the receiver, Lana wanted so much to say 'Actually, Daddy, Rebecca and me both enjoyed getting our brains fucked out last night!' that it was at the tip of her tongue, but she bit it down at the last moment while a blush spread out over her cheeks for even thinking such heretical thoughts. "Oh no, they've been very sweet to us. Very sweet and understanding, Daddy. And accommodating."

'That's something at least. I guess that sending Miss Stern with you wasn't such a bad idea after all. So… you said something about a gold cup?'

"Yes, but we weren't able to get it. Oh, but we found a gold dinner plate! Very nice, too. It's fairly large and unscratched, at least as far as I can see. Jo… I mean, Captain Swain reckons it's worth at least a thousand dollars! Maybe more!"

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Downstairs at the reception, Keyshada Hill was only paying scant attention to the conversation going on in her ear, being much more interested in the glittery gossip magazine she was reading and the wad of pink chewing gum she had in her mouth.

'… I mean, Captain Swain reckons it's worth at least a thousand dollars! Maybe more!'

'Oh, really? Well, congratulations, darling. That's. '

Sitting up straight, Keyshada put the magazine away and put her hand on the earphone to hear better. When the large sum was mentioned again a little while later along with a few names of people specializing in assessing antiques, she quickly grabbed a notepad and began to write down the details.

When the conversation ended with the female tourist saying that she would be going down to the lobby to wait for her friends, Keyshada unplugged her headset and picked up the magazine, trying to look like nothing at all had happened.

A few minutes later, the blonde tourist Keyshada remembered seeing a few times came down the stairs and walked straight towards her, causing the receptionist to nearly swallow her gum in nervous anticipation.

"Hi," Lana said once she reached the reception desk, wondering why the dark-skinned eighteen-year old girl with the pink tank top and the green Bermuda shorts seemed to be a little bit nervous.

"Hello, Miss," Keyshada said, once again putting down her magazine.
"I was wondering if it would be possible to have a cart with some tea and coffee and a couple of buns or something brought up to my suite in fifteen minutes or so?"

Recognizing the voice as the one she had just heard on the telephone, Keyshada smiled at the tourist and took the notepad again. "It certainly is, Miss…?"

"Lana Ferguson. The cart needs to be taken to suite four-four."

"Tea and coffee and a selection of sweet bread to suite four-four, noted," Keyshada said and smiled again as she tore off the page and put it on a nail labeled Kitchen Staff. "It'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Excellent. Thank you," Lana said with a genuine smile. Offering the receptionist a little wave, she turned around and crossed the lobby on her way outside.

Once the tourist had left, Keyshada let out the breath she had been holding and quickly added 'Lana Ferguson, suite four-four,' to the original note. Putting a cardboard sign that said Back Soon on top of the reception desk, Keyshada tore off the page from the notepad and flew out of the side door that was located close to the reception to find her cousin.

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Standing outside, Lana put her hands into her shorts pockets and felt like whistling a happy tune. Not longer after, she spotted Joey, Olly and Rebecca come up the street towards the hotel, with Olly's arm safely wrapped around Rebecca's waist, and Joey wearing a new, very loose t-shirt instead of the wrap-around Hawaiian shirt.

Once again finding the incredible turn of events hard to believe, Lana let out a relieved sigh and walked down the street to greet her friends.

"Hi again. Oh, you look much better now, Rebecca," Lana said, pulling her friend into a half-hug, mindful not to touch the injured arm that had been wrapped in a bandage that reached from the elbow to the wrist.

"Thank you. The nurse gave me some painkillers, but it didn't actually hurt that much to begin with," Rebecca said and looked down at her arm. "It was just the shock, I guess."

"Well, it was pretty damn gruesome down there… Brrrr. Let's not try that again in a hurry," Lana said and briefly got the shivers.

When Lana spotted a duffel bag in Olly's hand, she pointed at it and cocked her head. "Hey, didn't I get it all before? I've already put your travel bag in your suite, Rebecca…"

Chuckling, Joey reached over and punched her first mate's upper arm. "Sure you did, but Olly Rags here has decided to put down some roots for the first time in her life. She's moving in with Rebecca for the next few days to help her with her arm… and stuff, right, Olly?"

"And stuff, yeah," Olly said with a wide, toothy grin.

"Ohhhh. Okay. Well, that's definitely great news," Lana said and hugged Rebecca again.

"Well, I think so," Rebecca said and broke out in a little giggle that - judging by the smile that cracked her face in half - Olly thought was too cute for words.
Giggling back, Lana turned around and began to walk back up the street. "I've ordered some refreshments to your suite. I think they'll be there once we get back. You're all invited," she said, hooking her arm inside Joey's and sending the tall Skipper a warm smile.

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A few minutes later, Keyshada Hill barged into the seedy Rocking Bull bar in an even seedier side street that was never graced by the rays of the sun, not even in the middle of the afternoon.

Once the patrons recognized her, they all put away their weapons and went back to their card games, some of them mumbling about the things that could happen to little girls when they came barging in like that.

Scoffing at the phony threats, Keyshada went straight over to the table where she knew her cousin spent most of his time. "Rollie, I need to speak with you," she said quietly, leaning down towards the man who was reclining on a chair, holding an opened can of beer in his hand.

Her cousin - twenty-four year old Rollie Hill who had barely begun to shave yet - burped loudly and pulled out in the top hem of his wifebeater. "It better be good, girl," he said and emptied his beer.

"Is a thousand dollars good enough?"

That got Rollie's attention and he sat up straight and threw the empty can onto the floor. "Where?"

"At the hotel."

"In a suite?"

"Probably, but it's not cash. A tourist called her Daddy in New York and said that she'd found a gold dinner plate. I guess she meant out scuba diving."

"Uh-huh? Go on."

"Well, she also said that Joey Swain had guessed it would be worth around a thousand bucks," Keyshada said and gave her cousin the handwritten note.

"Joey Swain… don't like her. Bitch gives me the creeps," Rollie said and threw a hand sign that he had made up himself to show that he was a cool and dangerous fellow.

Blowing a gum bubble to show that she wasn't particularly awed by her cousin's appearance or hand gestures, Keyshada popped the bubble and put her hands on her hips. "Are you gonna deal with it or what?"

"Hell yeah, girl! I'm gonna call Anton and then him and me are gonna deal with it. Don't worry, you'll get your cut. Fifty bucks, right?" Rollie said and reached into his jeans pocket to deposit the note and find his cell phone.

"A hundred and fifty at least, smartass."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever," Rollie said and found his buddy's number in the registry.

"Don't ya wanna know which suite it's in, Rollie?" Keyshada said with a mocking look on her face.

"Watch your mouth, girl, I can still give you a good ass-beatin' if I have to!"
"Jesus, calm down, psycho. It's number four-four, but my cut just went up to two hundred bucks," Keyshada said and threw her cousin a hand gesture that - unlike Rollie's - was recognized internationally.

"Fuck off, Keyshada. You'll be lucky if I give you a fifty," Rollie said and got up, knowing that he had a physical advantage over Keyshada, if nothing else.

Huffing, Keyshada spun around and barged back out of the seedy bar, shooting her cousin another gesture on her way out.

"Dumb bitch," Rollie mumbled as he pressed the little button on the phone.

'Yo?' a male voice said a few seconds later.

"Yo, Anton, it's Rollie. Whatcha doin' right now?"

'Nothin'.

"Got time to meet me at the Rocking Bull in five minutes?"

'Sure. Whassup?'

"Maybe a little money, but we gotta work for it first."

'Fuck that, man."

"You know what I mean, Anton. Five minutes," Rollie said and closed the connection before Anton could talk back.

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Twelve minutes later, Rollie loitered at the front of the Rocking Bull, waiting impatiently for his buddy to show up. When he finally heard the unmistakable sound of Anton's moped chugging along, he stood up straight and went into the center of the street.

"Yo, Anton," Rollie said and slapped the other man a high five as he came to a halt.

"Yo," Anton said. Like his brother-in-crime, Anton Kozzak was twenty-four and had a few strands of very fine down covering his cheeks and his chin, but unlike the Afro-Caribbean Rollie, Anton was white and quite scraggly. "You said something about money?"

"That's right," Rollie said and climbed up behind his buddy. "A thousand bucks."

"Fuckin'-A, dude! Now we're talkin!' Anton said and tooted the moped's squeaky horn twice. "Where and how and when and all that shit?"

"In a suite at the hotel... first we gotta go up to Mr. Cassilano, though. I gotta ask him a few questions. I need to know if Keyshada got the details right," Rollie said and studied the handwritten note Keyshada had given him.

"Aw hell no... his attack dogs give me the shits, man!" Anton whined but still started the moped.

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A short while later, Anton swung the moped in through the service entrance at the back of Carlo Cassilano's mansion. They hadn't driven more than thirty yards up a curved driveway before three huge, black Rottweilers stormed up to a thin mesh fence and began to bark their heads off at the two men on the moped.

"Fuck me," Anton whined, looking like he was about to soil his pants.

A man dressed in a black suit came out to greet them, and he and Rollie soon went inside, leaving Anton a quivering mess on the gravelly driveway.

As always, Rollie was mightily impressed by the grandeur of the mansion, especially the many gold and silver statues - and as always, he almost craned his neck out of joint when he and the man in the suit went past a row of large windows that faced an outdoor swimming pool where a bevy of bikini-clad beauties were frolicking around merrily in the water, playing with colorful beach balls or just catching some sun.

When the man in the suit had knocked on the door to an office at the end of the hallway, he opened the door and stepped aside, ushering Rollie inside.

Behind a large mahogany desk that was clearly compensating for something unseen, the surprisingly short, fat and swarthy Carlo Cassilano - recently transferred to St. Thomas after holding a similar position in Las Vegas - was sitting in an armchair wearing a white terrycloth bathrobe. The look on his face proved that he was in the middle of his favorite pastime, counting his money, and he didn't even look up when Rollie walked across the thick carpets to stand in front of the desk.

"Mr. Cassilano?" Rollie squeaked a little while later, shuffling back and forth on the carpet.

"I've seen ya, Rollie. Don't wear a hole in my carpet. You may find yourself rolled up in it if you do that," Cassilano said in a deceptively normal voice.

"Yes, Mr. Cassilano. I… I… I've… I have a note."

"Aw, ain't that nice. So?"

"Uh… you know about artifacts and statues and stuff and I've learned from my, uh… learned about a possible…" - gulp - "learned about someone possibly finding a gold dinner plate somewhere out in the ocean, Mr. Cassilano."

That caught the boss' attention, and he pushed his chair back and got up. "You have it here? The dinner plate?"

"Uh, no, Sir. A tourist has it… b-but I wanted to hear ab-"

"How rude!" Cassilano said with a creepy chuckle. "A tourist grabbin' one of my dinner plates? How awfully rude. All right. You said you had a note?"

"I have the name of the tourist and her suite, b-but-"

"What's her name? I'll search for it online to see if she's found other things before. Rookies usually only find fool's gold," Cassilano said and went back to a laptop that was already up and running.

"L-Lana Ferguson, Sir," Rollie said, reading from the note.

"Okay…" Cassilano said, tapping on the keyboard. "Hmmm. Whoa," he said, letting out a whistle.

"Wh-what is it, Sir?"
"Blah, blah, blah, blah… 'Lana Ferguson's thirtieth birthday extravaganza. Blah, blah, blah, blah… Lana, seen here with her father, Alfred Ferguson…' Alfred Ferguson. Hmmm!” Cassilano said and leaned back in his armchair.

"Who's that?"

"A big man in the New York banking world. No, make that a very big man in the New York banking world. Fuck, and I don't have any of my associates with me. Fuck!” Cassilano said and slapped his fist impotently into the armrest of the chair. "If I'd had a couple of my boys, I could've held her for a King's ransom! Fuck!"

"But, Sir, me and Anton could, uh, kidnap her, and…"

"Kid, don't make me laugh," Cassilano said and waved his hand dismissively. "No, stick with the gold dinner plate for the time being. I want it tomorrow at noon."

"Uh…"

"Why are you still here? Are you deaf? Scram, kid," Cassilano said and went back to counting his money.

"Yes, Sir," Rollie said and bowed deeply. Spinning around, he scooted back out of the office, along the hallway - not even stopping to look at the girls at the swimming pool - and out of the back door.

Jumping onto the moped, he gave Anton's shoulder a hard slap and shouted: "Drive! Drive, man! Let's get the fuck out of here! I've got the best idea ever!"

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"More lemon tea, Joey?" Lana said with a smile, holding the pot ready in case the Skipper said yes.

"No, thanks," Joey said and put down the fragile cup on the equally fragile saucer. Leaning back in the armchair, she tried to cross her legs in a lady-like manner, but soon gave up and crossed them at the knee instead.

"How about another slice of chocolate sponge cake?"

"Ah… no. No, thank you."

"Oh. Okay," Lana said and put the pot and a tray with the last two slices down on the table. Folding her Bermuda shorts forward so they wouldn't get creased, she quickly made herself comfortable on a couch adorned with large, woven sunflower heads.

"So," Joey said just to fill the awkward silence, looking around at the hotel suite. It wasn't the first time in her life she was staying at a hotel, of course, but even so, she thought she'd never be able to fully relax in such a place. 'Everything is just too cold and sterile… impersonal… and that pattern on the couch and the chairs… Ye Gads!'

"So," Lana echoed, racking her brain to try to find a reason that would explain why their usually easy-going rapport had suddenly become so stilted.

When a gust of wind pushed open one of the French double doors and made the breezy curtain flap around wildly, Lana got up from the couch to close it.

Joey took that as her cue and moved to get up, but before she had time to leave the uncomfortable chair behind for good, Olly came tip-toeing back into the living room.
"She's asleep," the mechanic whispered, pointing her thumb back over her shoulder.

"Hmmm," Joey said, bumping back down into the chair.

Closing the double doors, Lana smiled at Olly and then returned to the couch arrangement. "Would you like more tea and sponge cake, Olly?"

"Boy, do you even have to ask?" Olly said quietly and poured herself a full cup of lemon tea after sitting down on the couch. Grabbing the second to last slice, she began to eat it at once, champing on it with great pleasure. "Love sponge cake," she said between chews.

"That's good, Olly," Lana said and sat down next to the mechanic.

"Yeah, but we never get it out on the boat. Skipper hates it!" Olly said with a grin as she chugged down half a cup of tea.

Forming an 'O' with her lips, Lana looked up and locked eyes with Joey who sent her a grin in return.

"Nah, I don't hate it. I just don't like it," Joey said with a shrug.

Throwing her rolled-up napkin at the Skipper, Lana pretended to pout. "Why didn't you tell me? You could have had the raisin bun I took. I love sponge cake!"

"Ah, what's the point? We all got what we wanted," Joey said with a wink.

Lana could only answer that by sticking her tongue out, so she did. A little while later, she folded her legs up underneath her and began to toy with the hem of her Bermuda shorts. "Where do we go from here, Skip?"

"Regarding the treasure?"

"Yeah."

"Well. Let's look at the details," Joey said and leaned forward. "Within a relatively small area, we found a gold dinner plate and a gold cup. That leads me to believe that we could find other items somewhere nearby. It could be other forms of dinnerware, or it could be jewelry."

"The storm must have upset the ocean floor…?"

"Probably. There's really nothing stopping us from going out again tomorrow. Rebecca can't join us, but you and I should be able to cover a pretty good area if we came up with a plan and stuck to it."

"Hmmm," Lana said and began to rub her brow. 'Tomorrow… that's Wednesday already… we only have three and a half days to go… and all of Saturday, we have to pack and get to the airport. Hmmm;' she thought.

Chuckling over the thoughtful look on Lana's face, Olly leaned forward and snatched up the last slice of chocolate sponge cake. "Love this stuff," she said, grinning broadly at the Skipper.

Two thoughts flashed through Lana's mind at the same time - the first being her heart telling her to stay beyond Saturday; and the second being a nagging doubt that soon began to fester, asking what Joey would say when she found out.
She briefly opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it again, feeling she hadn't thought everything through yet and preferring to keep quiet until she'd had time to read the Skipper better.

"So… Lana?" Joey said, wondering where the blonde woman had gone off to.

"Uh… sorry. I kinda zoned out there," Lana said, trying to cover her embarrassment with an apologetic smile. "Well, I think we should head back out tomorrow. If Rebecca feels up to it, she can come along. After all, she found the dinner plate. She could keep you company while the Skipper and I were diving, Olly…?"

"Works for me," the mechanic said and put down the empty plate.

Getting up from her chair, much to Lana's surprise, Joey straightened her new t-shirt and put her hands on her hips. "All right, that's a deal. With that settled, I need to go back to the boat to replenish our oxygen canisters and order some more fuel."

"Oh, but… now? Couldn't you wait until after dinner?" Lana said and swung her legs down on the plush carpet. She quickly got up and closed the distance between herself and the tall Skipper. Smiling wanly, she wrapped her arm around Joey's waist almost like she was actively trying to prevent her from leaving.

"Naw, I'm sorry. I hope you hadn't planned anything…?"

"Oh… no. No, I hadn't," Lana said and shot Joey a smile that never quite reached her eyes. 'Only that I had hoped we'd make love again tonight… in a soft, comfy bed. Damn. I guess I got my answer to the question… Joey probably isn't interested in going beyond what we've already shared… Double damn.'

"Well, I'll be stayin' right here takin' good care of my baby," Olly said and tip-toed over to the bedroom to peek in before joining Joey and Lana at the center of the room.

"That's cool, Olly. Well, see ya tomorrow, Lana," Joey said and leaned down towards the blonde woman, very clearly aiming to kiss her.

At first, Lana didn't really feel like being kissed, but the sight of Joey's soft lips pushed her in the right direction, and she leaned her head back and gave the Skipper a very nice Goodnight kiss. "Bye, Skip. I'll be down at the pier tomorrow morning at… say, seven thirty?"

"Okay by me. Olly?"

"Sure thing, Skip."

"Bye, everybody," Joey said and quietly left the suite.

Once the disappointing development had fully registered, Lana let out a little sigh and turned towards Olly. "Is there anything I can do for you, Olly?"

"Oh, no thanks, Lana," Olly said and played with the zipper of her boiler suit. "You know, when Rebecca wakes up after her nap, I'm gonna pamper her so badly that her blood sugar will go through the roof," she continued, bumping shoulders with Lana.

"That's great. I'll just collect the dishes and—"

"Naw, I got 'em. Just put 'em on the cart and wheel it into the hall, right?"
"Yes, next to the door. I asked for it to be delivered here instead of at my own suite, so they might get confused if it's in front of four-five instead of four-four. Well, I'll be next door if you need anything. See ya," Lana said and moved over to the exit. Standing in the doorway, she offered the mechanic a quick wave before closing the door behind her.

"Ooooooh, only one person can help me with what I'll be needin'!" Olly said, grinning cheesily as she put the cups and the saucers on the cart.

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'Dominique?' Rebecca said in a voice muffled by the bedroom door.

In two heartbeats, Olly threw down the brochure she had been reading, jumped up from the couch and raced to the door she had left slightly ajar. "Yes, baby?"

Rebecca smacked her lips a couple of times and stretched the kinks out of her back while she was still lying in bed. "I'm really thirsty… would you mind getting me a glass of water?"

"One jug of h-two-oh comin' right up!" Olly said and raced into the kitchenette to get the water.

Shortly after, she sat down on the edge of the bed and handed the glass to Rebecca who had propped herself up on a few pillows.

After Rebecca had gulped down the clear liquid, she gave the glass back to Olly and began to run her fingers up and down the mechanic's boiler suit-clad arm. "Thank you. Hey, Dominique?"

"Yeah?"

Moving the thin blanket aside, Rebecca cocked her head and took a good look at Olly's clothing. "One of us is wearing something entirely inappropriate," she said and sent Olly a message with her eyes that gave away that she wasn't talking about the white nightgown she had slipped into when she had gone to bed.

"Mmmm?" Olly said in a mischievous tone, sliding the zipper downwards. Once it was at the bottom stop, she slowly pulled the boiler suit off first one shoulder, then the other. When it pooled around her waist, she calmly stepped out of it and let it fall to the floor.

Only wearing a pair of black panties, she crept up into the bed and slid up Rebecca's body, stopping to kiss her in a few carefully chosen spots. "Is this better?" she husked, nibbling at Rebecca's chin.

"Much better," Rebecca said, looking down at herself and her dark-skinned lover, marveling at the incredible contrast between Olly's chocolate brown skin, her own pinkish hue and the chalk-white bedlinen.

Kissing Rebecca again, Olly rolled over onto her left side to stay as far away from the injured arm as possible. Reaching up, she began to caress Rebecca's face with her long, slender fingers, moving away a few strands of ash blonde hair and drawing little, abstract patterns on the fair skin.

"Dominique?" Rebecca said, already beginning to feel a tingle from the mechanic's surprisingly tender touch.

"Yeah?"

Rolling onto her right side, Rebecca adjusted her position on the bed so she could be face to face with the slightly taller Olly. "Thank you for comforting me this morning. I was… I had really fallen to pieces," she said and reached out to place a kiss on Olly's lips.
"How could I not comfort you? Man, Rebecca… you were hurting," Olly whispered, matching the kiss with one of her own.

"Well, thank you, anyway. Just to show how much I appreciate you looking out for me, I'm planning to share some of my favorite things with you. Like," she said, suddenly moving in close to run her tongue across the hollow of Olly's throat, "this, and," - going further down, she began to nibble on Olly's prominent collarbone, "this."

"I like it already! But, baby… your arm?"

"Is throbbing a little bit," Rebecca said and took a brief pause from her activities. "… but the rest of me is throbbing a lot."

"Mmmm!"

"Though, I do need your help to take my gown- …yes, like that," Rebecca continued, snickering out loud when Olly had pulled the white nightgown off her even before she'd had time to finish the sentence.

Licking her lips in sweet anticipation, Olly looked at Rebecca's plentiful curves with a wolfish grin on her face that grew impossibly wide when she noticed that Rebecca wasn't wearing any panties.

"I know," Rebecca said, briefly running her fingers through her ash blonde patch of hair. "I thought, ah, we're going to take them off anyway, so… why bother?"

"Very true, baby! Very true… should save us at least, oh, four seconds," Olly said and pulled down her own underwear.

"Way too long, Dominique," Rebecca said and put out both hands.

Olly took them at once and allowed herself to be pulled up into a sitting position, unsure of what was about to happen.

At first, the two women just gave each other's bodies long, admiring looks, but Rebecca soon pulled Olly closer and began to trail her fingers all over the mechanic's soft skin. Her neck, her back, her throat, her upper chest, her breasts, her rock-hard nipples, her stomach, back to the buttocks and further down the thighs - no inch of Olly was left untouched.

Moaning softly, Olly felt her skin catch fire from her lover's touch, and she began to rock her hips to show that she needed some attention there, too.

"Not yet, Dominique," Rebecca whispered into the mechanic's ear, gently pushing her around on the bed until she sat with her back turned. Leaning forward, Rebecca scooted up to sit immediately behind Olly's rear, spreading her legs out past the wide hips to have some leverage for the next part of her plan.

Olly began to get an idea of what they were about to do when Rebecca's fingers ran slowly up her stomach until they reached the underside of her full breasts. When she felt her breasts and nipples kneaded and then squeezed by Rebecca, she couldn't stop a long moan from escaping her lips, and she turned her head to both sides, desperate to kiss the woman who was giving her so much pleasure. "Baby… please! Please, I need to kiss you… now!" she whispered between moans, but Rebecca was merciless in her rejections.

Keeping her left hand working with Olly's left nipple, Rebecca slowly withdrew her other hand, moving it down past the belly button, through the dark patch of hair, around the hip and down to the butt where it came to a rest. "Lean forward," Rebecca whispered, waiting for Olly to comply.
When Olly leaned a bit forward, Rebecca moved her fingers ahead until they were resting at the lowest part of Olly's dripping wet opening. "Are you ready for more?" she whispered, once again waiting for a reply.

"Uh-huh!" Olly moaned, quickly followed by a few incomprehensible groans.

Moving her fingers up the length of Olly's pink, swollen folds, Rebecca let the tip of her index finger slip inside, but she quickly pulled it out again.

"Oh nooo!" Olly groaned, but Rebecca just chuckled and continued the sweet torture. Reaching up the furthest she could, she was able to touch Olly's exposed, sensitive clit with her middle finger, and she gave it a little caress before moving back down again.

"You- you're killing me!" Olly moaned, leaning backwards to rest against Rebecca's front, but she was cut off mid-stream when Rebecca suddenly plunged two fingers deep inside her and began to move them in and out in the ancient rhythm.

The long, exquisite build-up had given Olly such a fiery buzz that she only needed a dozen thrusts by Rebecca to make her come, and when the warm orgasm rolled over her, she let out a series of resounding groans and began to buck hard against the fingers that were still moving deep inside her.

Panting like crazy, Olly tried to reach behind her to pay back some of the affections but she couldn't reach any worthwhile part of Rebecca's skin. Groaning again, she was relieved to feel Rebecca withdraw her fingers from her burning hot core - thus reducing the risk of spontaneous combustion.

"Oh God, Rebecca… where did you learn that…?" Olly croaked, feeling the first afterglow slowly fall down upon her.

"I just used my imagination. I'm a new woman now… after last night, there's nothing I can't do," Rebecca whispered, leaning forward to nibble on Olly's neck. Pulling her hand back, she moved her drenched fingers up to caress her own breasts, feeling them grow even more sensitive than they already were.

"I n- need a moment…"

"You can have it. Last night, you gave me seven. Now I've given you one. Six more to come… pun very much intended," Rebecca continued, snickering at the double entendre.

"Oh, God…!" Olly croaked, feeling her buzz return instantly, fueled by her lover's sizzling promise.

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CHAPTER 9

"Ohhhhh, not again!" Lana groaned out loud when she heard Rebecca and Olly go at it for the fourth time that evening. Reclining on her couch with a book and a glass of pineapple juice, she tried to shut out the sounds of passion, but when the volume was turned up yet again by the two unstoppable lovers, it proved too much for her.

Thinking briefly about tearing a napkin in two and stuffing it into her ears, she quickly arrived at the second best solution - she needed to get out of there before the hotel walls would buckle and collapse under the strain of Rebecca and Olly working out like a pair of Energizer bunnies.
Lana chuckled out loud at that mental image but suddenly realized that it probably wasn’t too far off the truth. "Wow, and to think how buttoned up Rebecca has always been… huh. Incredible," Lana said out loud when she slipped into a pair of canvas shoes and took her key card, her wallet and a small purse to put it in, and finally her wristwatch that read a quarter to seven.

"Oh… dinner is still being served… excellent," she said as she locked the door to suite four-five behind her, remembering to take out the key card so it wouldn’t act as an open invitation for unwanted guests.

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After enjoying a light salad and a glass of her indispensable Diet Coke, Lana explored Charlotte Amalie, walking up and down the charming streets that she hadn't had a good opportunity to get to know before.

Over the next hour, she visited several rustic shops - and one or two tourist traps - on her way around town; loving the quaint atmosphere rather than buying anything.

Beginning to get a little tired from constantly having to walk up or down the steep streets, she slowly moved back towards the Long Bay Resort Hotel, intent on stopping in the restaurant again to get a little evening snack.

When she turned the final corner at a flower shop, she stopped dead in her tracks. Across the street, she spotted two young men sharing a moped that she would have called punks or hoodlums had she been back in New York City. The two young men - one white, one Afro-Caribbean - were talking quietly to each other, sticking their heads together in a way that made Lana narrow her eyes.

Looking over her shoulder, she noticed that in the intervening hours since she had ventured out on her little tour of the city, most tourists had gone back to their hotels, and that the street leading up to the Long Bay Resort Hotel was mostly abandoned, save for her and the two moped-powered hoodlums.

"Hmmm," she said pensively, looking at her wristwatch which read eight thirty-five. Looking back up, she realized that she had to go past the hoodlums to get to the entrance, and also that the door man wasn’t anywhere in sight.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," she mumbled to herself. "Here I am, thousands of miles from home and who do I run into? Punks. Sheesh. Okay… now what, Lana?"

When a third hoodlum - older, and much, much larger - joined the first two, riding a moped that nearly buckled under his weight, Lana made up her mind. Instead of taking her chances at the door, she spun around and walked back down the street, headed for the port, the Argo and Joey Swain's broad shoulders to keep her company.

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Walking onto the pier, Lana felt like she was caught in a deja vu when she spotted the Argo by itself at the end of the long, wooden aisle. At once, a warm, tingly sense of anticipation took hold in the pit of her stomach, spreading out slowly until it filled her entire body by the time she reached the stern of the boat.

Even though the sun hadn't yet set, the lights were on inside the bridge and most of the compartments below. Soft music drifted out of the opened portholes, and occasionally, a strange sound akin to hissing air could be heard from somewhere inside the boat. Up on the pier, a small compressor was churning away, connected to the Argo through a bright red hose that went down the opened hatch to the engine bay.

'Oh, was this such a good idea after all…? It sounds like Joey is busy… maybe I'll just be in her way,' Lana thought, chewing on her fingernails.
Sighing, she walked up the gangway and around the back of the bridge. She quickly peeked in but the Skipper wasn't in there. Turning around, Lana moved down the stairs to the compartments, saying "Yoo-hoo!" several times so she wouldn't spook Joey or cause her to drop anything.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she could hear that the hissing sound came from the engine bay behind the stairs, and she moved the heavy, waterproof door ajar to peek in.

Inside, Joey was busy refilling one of their oxygen tanks using the bright red hose from the compressor. She was wearing an extra-heavy-duty pair of ear protectors that covered most of her head and that ensured she wouldn't have been able to hear any of Lana's Yoohoo's, no matter how loud she'd have said them.

In the end, Lana's presence alone made Joey turn her head towards the door. When she spotted the cute blonde standing in the doorway, she broke out in a wide, toothy, genuine smile that, unfortunately, looked rather weird in conjunction with the huge ear protectors.

Lana didn't care about the ear protectors. Her knees promptly turned to jelly at the sight of the Skipper's genuine smile and her sparkling eyes, and she suddenly knew that it had been the right decision to come down to the pier after all.

Joey put away the air tank she was working on and quickly climbed up the metal ladder next to her. A few seconds later, the compressor was turned off, leading to a merciful silence that was once again only broken by the soft music.

Taking off her hideous ear protectors and throwing them into the bridge, Joey quickly jumped down the stairs and slipped her hand around Lana's waist. "Hi. What'cha doing down here?" she said, leaning in for a kiss.

"I wanted to see you," Lana said between several, little kisses.

"Awww. How's Olly and Rebecca?"

"Oh, they're, uh… like rabbits," Lana said with an embarrassed chuckle.

"That bad, huh?"

"No, worse."

"Okay…?"

"In short, once they got going, they didn't stop. At all."

Chuckling and wiggling her eyebrows, Joey put her hand on the small of Lana's back and led her out of the engine bay. "That's Olly, all right."

"Maybe, but I can't believe that it's Rebecca!" Lana said and let out a little laugh.

Joey quickly pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the pantry, sitting down on the bench and patting the seat next to her.

Smiling, Lana accepted the invitation and sat down, scooting up very close to the Skipper who was still quite warm from the work she had just done.

"Uh…" -- "So…" they both said as one, snickering when they realized they had spoken over each other.
"You first," Joey said. "You're my guest."

"Thanks, Skip. Oh, it wasn't anything special, I just wanted to ask if you knew anything about a couple of tough guys I just saw quite near to the hotel…?"

"Tough guys?"

"Well, I thought they looked tough. Two Afro-Caribbeans and a white man. I guess they were teenagers or maybe early twenties… two of them, at least. The third one was a couple years older. They were hanging out on some mopeds by the entrance to the hotel. I… uh… I guess I didn't… uh… feel like going past them. That's why I came down here instead," Lana said, scrunching up her face when she realized that it sounded like she had only visited Joey as a last resort.

If the Skipper picked up on it, she didn't show it, and Lana let out a little sigh of relief when Joey pulled her even closer by wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Tough guys on mopeds…? Well, first of all, I think you made the right decision, Lana. Even here on St. Thomas, there's no point in risking anything. Creeps are creeps no matter where they live," Joey said and gave Lana a little crush. "But tough guys on mopeds…? Hmmm…"

"They were."

"Oh! Oh yeah, I think I know who you're talking about. Oh yeah… if it's the same guys I'm thinking about, they're a couple a' no good bums."

"Oh…"

"I'm thinking it could be same black kid Olly and I nearly got into a fist fight with once… he and a white buddy were messing around on a moped. We happened to be around when he stole a wallet from a tourist. I chased him down and Olly threatened to tear him a new one if he didn't cough it up. He did, but he definitely didn't take it kindly. That was a couple of years ago, though."

"So you and Olly are the local Batgirls, then?" Lana said and snuggled up into Joey's strong arms.

"Yeah, but you have to remember that we depend on the tourists. If punks like that give the city a bad rep, the tourists are going to stay away… and if they do, the thing swirling around in the crapper will be our livelihood."

"Good point. And charming language, Skip."

"I know. Hey, can I get you anything to drink? You want a rum and Coke or something?" Joey said and mussed Lana's hair on her way up from the bench.

Groaning and slapping the Skipper's stomach, Lana quickly mussed her hair back to the way it was. "No thanks, Joey."

"Okie-dokie. Listen, I need to finish up filling our air tanks. I gotta bring the compressor back to Everett by nine thirty or else he's going to charge me double," Joey said, pointing behind her with her thumb.

"Oh, sure, no problem. I'll just sit here and think about what we can do the rest of the evening," Lana said and moved her legs up on the melamine-plated table.
Standing in the doorway, Joey only needed a single look at Lana's bare thighs to know exactly how - and where - she would like to spend the evening. "Uh, yeah. You do that. I won't be long," she said with a cheeky grin.

"Rollie, what the hell is that meatloaf doing here?" Anton whispered into Rollie's ear, hiding in the shadows of an arcade across the street from the hotel with his two would-be partners in crime.

"He's our muscle, dude. In case we have to pacify the broad or something. We'll take the gold plate and Tyrone will snatch her. Easy as fuck," Rollie said, leaning against the brick wall forming one of the arches.

"If he's our muscle, why couldn't he even tell the door man who shooed us over here to shut the hell up?"

"Because that would attract attention, dude. Jeez, Anton, ya gotta learn how to think. How long have we been doin' this?"

"Uh… I don't know…? A couple of years?"

Rolling his eyes at his partner's stupidity, Rollie just nodded and moved away from him. "Yo, Tyrone. Whassup, bro?"

"Aw, nothin' much. I'm kinda hungry," Tyrone Fuller said, shaking his large, bear-like head. A former college wrestler, Tyrone had kept up his three hundred-thirty lbs. bulk after his career ended - he was thrown out for substance abuse - by wolfing down unhealthy amounts of cheeseburgers and milkshakes on a daily basis.

"Uh-huh? Well, bro, once we're done here, you'll get your cut. Your fair share, man. Two hundred bucks. How's that sound?" Rollie said and thumped his fist into the big man's shoulder.

"Sounds like food's on the table, man."

"Yeah, bro. For two hundred bucks, you could buy a cow and just chew on that, huh?"

"Rollie! Rollie…! Rollie!" Anton whispered, waving his hand at the self-appointed leader of the gang.

Rolling his eyes again, Rollie shuffled back to Anton. "Yeah?"

"They've just turned on the lights in the windbreak. The door man is going in now," Anton said, stating the obvious as all three hoodlums could see with their own eyes that the lights had been turned on and that the door man was closing the doors and unbuttoning his fancy coat.

"Okay. I know from Keyshada that we need to wait another fifteen minutes. That makes it ten sharp. Once the bell tower chimes, we're going in through the back door," Rollie said, suddenly a lot more focused.

Anton and Tyrone just nodded, both feeling the tension and the excitement starting to build.

At a quarter to ten, Joey came back into the pantry, wiping her hands, arms and neck on an old rag. "Shoot, now I know why Olly is always naked under that boiler suit of hers. Hotter than hell in there and we don't even have the engines running."

"Let me get you something to drink," Lana said and went over to the small refrigerator next to the sink. "Coke?"
"Yes, please. Don't bother with the glass. Oh… and… how about taking the unlabelled bottle as well?"

"Of Miguel's rum?"

"Yep."

Holding the bottle, Lana turned around and cocked her head. "Joey Swain, you're not trying to get me loose and uninhibited, are you?"

"Oh, but of course not," Joey said with an angelic smile plastered on her face.

"Hmmm!" Lana said, grabbing two shot glasses in addition to the bottle and the can of soda.

Placing the items on the table, Lana went back to her original position next to the Skipper and snuggled down again. She quickly cracked open Joey's can and placed it in front of her,

"Why, thank you, dear," Joey said, snatched the can and brought it to her lips. Several long gulps later, she put the half-empty soda back on the table and sighed contentedly.

Smiling broadly, Joey took the unlabeled bottle of spiced rum and unscrewed the cap. "One for you," she said as she poured the golden liquid into Lana's glass, "and one for me."

"Thanks. What was that silly thing you said when we had the rum down at The Bait and Spear?" Lana said and took her glass.

"Ho! Ho! Down the hatch!" Joey shouted and chugged down her shot.

Chuckling out loud, Lana leaned her head back and let out a resounding "Ho! Ho! Down the hatch!" before emptying her shot in one gulp.

"Oh, very good, Lana", Joey said and mussed the blonde's hair all over again. "Except…"

"'Except'… what? I drank it all, didn't I? And I didn't even cry!"

"Oh, sure, but the proper answer to ho ho down the hatch is 'atch!"

"Oh…" Lana said and looked at her empty shot glass. "Oh, what the hell. Let's have another one."

"One more for the road for my baby and me," Joey said, paraphrasing the old song as she poured them a new shot each. Taking her own glass, she turned towards Lana and offered her a sly grin. "Are you loose and uninhibited yet?"

"No, but I have a feeling I will be after this one. Hey, would you mind if I started the chant?"

"Not at all. Let me hear it!"

"Ho! Ho! Down the hatch!" Lana shouted and gulped down the spiced rum.

"'atch!" Joey echoed and followed Lana's example by draining every last drop from her shot glass.
Leaning back on the bench, Lana felt her eyes begin to cross in an odd manner, and her body temperature suddenly grew by several degrees. Chuckling goofily, she snuggled up close to Joey and let out a rum-laced sigh. "Just so you know, this isn't loose and uninhibited. This is what I was hoping we had done back in my hotel suite already, but you left before I could do anything, and anyway, you were kinda distant and out of it the whole time. Why were you kinda distant back then, Joey?"

"Oh… you know. It just wasn't my world," the Skipper said, thinking that she had better put the bottle away before the wildly rambling Lana would get drunk for real - the only problem was that she needed to put it into the cupboard, but she couldn't be bothered to get up from the bench.

"I think you'd like my apartment back home in New York, actually. It's really functionally decorated and not fleecy or overly plush or feminine or anything. Kinda like your boat, but more white and less battleship gray. I've got a great view over a park, and often in the morning, all kinds of really nice women are jogging down there. I often have my morning coffee looking at those nice women, thinking about how they… shit, listen to me ramble," Lana said, chuckling again.

"Well, I think you're cute when you ramble. Anyway, perhaps I could come and visit you sometime…?"

"Mmmm," Lana said, her fanciful thoughts suddenly returning to the deadline that was looming in the horizon - Saturday.

"What's on your mind?"

"Saturday. But also Wednesday, Thursday and Friday."

"Uh… okay?"

"Oh, Skip, I just don't know what to do…" Lana said and sat up straight. Reaching out, she began to toy with the empty Coke can, tapping a beat on it with a fingernail and spinning it around on the melamine-plated table.

"With your father?"

"With my Dad and the treasure hunt and you and me. God, I'm so confused," Lana said and rubbed her numb face. "This has been the best time of my life… but it'll cause the worst time of my life. Why? Because after this… after you and me… after making love with you and enjoying it so much, how can I go back to New York and my stuffy Dad and my so-called boyfriend…? Jesus, I'm so damn confused!"

"I understand, Lana. Even if I've never been in such a shitty situation, I definitely understand," Joey said and ran her hand up and down Lana's back.

Chuckling darkly, Lana made a sweeping gesture with her hand that included the Skipper. "I had never counted on it being like this… when I first saw the Argo, I was so pissed off with you and your boat and your web site… but then I met you at the harbor master's office. And the rest is history.

"Oh, you know. That's the impact I always have on women," Joey said, leaning over to give Lana a few tickles.

"There's just something I don't understand about you, Joey… why did you retire from the Navy? Is it because you're too old? Because, frankly, I've never met a woman in better shape than you," Lana said, turning around to lock her Irish green - and slightly unfocused - eyes onto the Skipper's sky blue ones.

The question made Joey pull her hands back and recline on the bench. She began to chew on her cheek and soon let out a sound that was a cross between a snort and a grunt. "I didn't retire. I was dishonorably discharged."
"Oh… oh, I'm sorry for digging around in your old wounds. Please forgive me, Joey… I couldn't know," Lana said and put a warm hand on Joey's thigh.

"Ah, it's all right. Old news."

"But what happened?"

"I was busted by a superior officer, in bed with a cute little redhead from the mass. She had wanted to comfort me a couple of days after the accident with the mine I told you about earlier. One thing led to the next, and finally, we had sex in my quarters. And I got busted out on my ass for it. Dumbest mistake I ever made."

"Wait, Joey, that's the wrong way around! What the hell right did they have to throw out someone as strong and professional as you just because you are who you are? Jesus, woman! I know all you sailors have salt water in your veins, but Joey Swain, you're looking at it from the wrong end!" Lana said, thumping her fist down onto the table.

"Whoa, baby! Simmer down, Mount Helena!" Joey said with a grin, pretending to shy back from Lana's uncharacteristic outburst.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that sort of thing just pisses me off royally!"

"You don't have to tell me, I'm sitting right here!"

"Yeah… I guess you are. Well. Sorry. I think I need another shot," Lana said and reached for the bottle, but Joey took it and put the cap back on before she could reach it.

"Uh, no, I don't think that would be a good idea right now." Getting up, she shuffled over to the cupboard and put the bottle on the lower shelf before closing the door. "Listen…"

"Oh, no, are you telling me to leave?" Lana said, blinking several times and shooting Joey the roundest doe-eyes she could just to convince her to let her stay for a little while longer.

"Nope," Joey said with a sly grin. "I was gonna ask if you'd care to join me in my bunk?"

Lana's jaw slipped down to somewhere just above her bosom, but she managed to snap back to the real world before she drooled on herself. "Well… I don't think that particular pick-up line is in any of the books I've ever read," she said hoarsely.

"Nah. Made it up just now," Joey said, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Awww. How can a girl say no to that?" Lana said and got up. Her first step was a bit wobbly, but by the second, she had already compensated and was doing just fine.

Leaning against each other, Joey and Lana quickly went into Joey's cabin and began to undress.

"Okay… I'm dreaming, right?" Lana said as she was about to pull off her t-shirt. "This isn't really happening, is it? I'm not in your cabin and we're not about to make love, are we?"

When a loose, white t-shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts flew off to either side leaving a mostly nude Joey in their wake, Lana realized that she wasn't dreaming, that it was really happening and that they were about to make love.

"If you're not in the mood, we can just cuddle," Joey said, pulling Lana so close that her pert nipples poked the shorter woman's upper chest.
"No, I'm good," Lana said, quickly pulling off her t-shirt and stepping out of her shorts. "You know, it's kinda fortunate that we're here in the Caribbean instead of being up north in the Arctic Ocean or something with all the undressing we've been doing. I don't think I've ever undressed as much in my entire life as I have these past couple of days…"

"Are you complaining?" Joey husked, leaning down to claim Lana's lips.

"Oh no, merely making an obser-MMMPF!"

While they were kissing, Joey let her hands roam down Lana's back, gently clawing, teasing and caressing the soft skin. When she reached the elastic band holding Lana's underwear in place, she stilled her motions and let her hand rest in the small of Lana's back.

Breaking off the kiss, Joey couldn't resist the temptation of nibbling at Lana's lips, or even capturing the blonde's bottom lip with her own.

Lana responded to that by grinning mischievously and going straight for the sensitive spot on Joey's neck just below her ear, a move that earned her a husky moan that soon morphed into a deep, low groan.

"Oh, you're a wild one," Joey growled once Lana moved away.

"This time, I want to take it slowly… very, very slowly," Lana said and pulled the two of them closer to the bunk.

Joey still held her hand above Lana's panties, but when their needs grew, she moved her thumb inside the elastic band and got ready to pull them down. "May I?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Lana said and helped Joey slide them down her hips. "And now you," she continued, reaching out for the Skipper's underwear.

Once they were both as naked as the day they were born, they pulled each other close again and went on a little journey of exploration with their hands, fingers and lips, finding all their favorite spots and super-sensitive zones, like the outside of Lana's left breast or the skin leading into Joey's V's.

More than ready to take it to the next level, Joey gently put her leg between Lana's and pushed her backwards to the edge of the bunk.

Suddenly scooping Lana up like she weighed nothing at all - earning herself a loud, delighted squeal in the process - Joey deposited the petite woman on the bunk and crawled up after her, already kissing her way up Lana's right thigh on the way to her favorite place in the world.

Stopping just shy of the already glistening flesh, Joey ran her fingers up and down the insides of Lana's thighs to give her an extra, little thrill before they got started. "Any requests?" she husked, shooting Lana a smoldering gaze.

"Uhhh, no…" Lana breathed, arching her back off the bunk in sheer anticipation.

Grinning, Joey decided to have some fun with Lana's legs first, but when she moved back from the blonde's sweet spot, she only earned herself a disappointed groan. "I'll be back, baby. There are…" - kiss - "...just a couple…" - kiss - "…of things I'd..." - kiss - "…like to do to you first," Joey said, kissing her way down Lana's left thigh until she reached the knee.
Lana groaned again and raised her abdomen insistently but found herself thoroughly ignored. When Joey didn't show signs of wanting to come to her rescue, she let out a brief whimper and moved her hand down to play with herself just to get some relief from the throbbing beat that already ran through her heated flesh.

"Hey, didn't you just say ya wanted to take it slowly?" Joey said, temporarily moving back from licking the inside of Lana's left knee.

"Uh-huh… need… you…"

"Well, you'll have to wait just a little longer," Joey continued, suddenly sliding both Lana's legs over her shoulders.

Quickly scooting up the lithe body underneath her, she was soon sharing a deep kiss with the surprised blonde - cutting off a strong moan - before raising herself up on her elbows and pressing her abdomen against Lana's.

Suddenly finding herself folded up like a pocket knife and feeling her already super-sensitive center stretched and spread open nearly caused Lana to crash over the edge before they had even started, and she dug her head into the pillow and let out a wailing moan. Again she tried to reach down and take matters into her own hands, but found the path blocked by Joey's strong torso. When she couldn't get any further, she put her hands on Joey's back instead and pressed down as hard as she could to at least apply some sweet pressure.

"You like that, do ya?" Joey husked, gently rubbing her abdomen against Lana and feeling how the blonde's love juices coated her lower stomach and dark patch of hair.

"Joey… oh, Joey… you… I n-… I need y- you…" Lana stuttered. The third time Joey pressed against her, she pressed back, arching her back off the bunk and growling insistently, telling the Skipper in no uncertain terms that she should get on with it.

Chuckling throatily, Joey eased Lana's legs off her shoulders and lowered herself down onto the whimpering blonde. Moments later, their mouths were connected with such force that ten wild horses couldn't pull them apart.

It didn't take long for their tongues to dance wildly against each other, forming tidal waves of passion that flowed through both women; causing their skin to catch fire whenever the other let her hands roam down the glistening, writhing body; and creating an aching, throbbing need between their legs that sent copious amounts of juices oozing out of them.

When the need to breathe overcame even the need to stay connected to the Skipper, Lana broke off the kiss and took in several deep breaths. Moaning loudly, she put her hands on Joey's shoulders and began to push the taller woman down to the spot that needed so much attention it had nearly caught fire. "B- baby, I need you… need you… now…" she husked, whimpering when Joey continued to nibble at her jaw and throat instead of following her simple plea.

"In a minute, baby. I'm just gonna do it slowly like you-"

"I… need… you… now!" Lana said with her eyes closed, digging her head into the pillow and pushing the Skipper downwards.

Proud that she had been able to get Lana turned on so hard - and feeling achingly aroused herself - Joey grinned and put down a long line of kisses past Lana's collar bones, her delightful breasts with the two erect peaks and her taut stomach that simply begged to be nibbled at.

Finally arriving at her favorite place in the world, Joey almost felt intoxicated by the musky scent of arousal that greeted her from Lana's gloriously slick center. As her backside reached the end wall of the cramped bunk, she leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the fine outer folds. "I'm here, baby. Damn, you're so sex-"
"Uhhn! …now!"

"Okay, okay… not much for talkin', huh?" Joey said with a grin before she made her tongue hard to lap up what she could of the salty liquid.

The simple motion gave her a rich reward as Lana let out an impressive groan and pressed her strong legs against the walls of the bunk - moments later, she raised her hips off the bunk and practically pushed her burning hot center into Joey's mouth. "Oh God, baby… Oh, God…" Lana croaked, moaning sensually.

The Skipper was quick to take advantage of the situation by grabbing a pillow she had pushed up against the wall and stuffing it under Lana's rear. Once Lana lowered her hips with a trembling sigh, the additional height offered Joey perfect access to the grand, pink prize.

Grinning, she eased down between Lana's thighs and went in to collect her earnings. Carefully spreading the delicate folds with her fingers, she extended her tongue and let it slide around several times; in, out, up, down, and finally up again, heading towards Lana's swollen bundle of nerves.

As she reached it, she briefly paused to glance up at Lana's face, not quite believing the incredible stroke of luck that had made her meet the blonde, sexy beauty.

Lana's eyes were still closed, but the blissful look on her face and the flush that spread across her throat and down to her breasts told a story of how much she enjoyed what they were doing.

While Joey was still admiring Lana's face and body, her lips parted and the pink tip of her tongue came out of its warm, wet cavern to lick across her lips, sending Joey's already needy center into a series of throbs.

Thinking about two or three - or four or five - things she'd like to have Lana do to her a little later on, Joey let out an excited moan before she leaned down and began to feast on her lover's exposed nub. Gently putting her lips on it, she extended her tongue and traced the outer edges and the fine texture all along the front and top.

Lana's response was immediate. Letting out a husky groan, she raised her hips off the pillow to get the most out of the Skipper's roaming, but gentle, tongue. As her clit and her lips were tended to in a way she had never thought possible, she began to fondle her breasts to keep everything even. Kneading her two peaks, she couldn't hold back a series of moans and sighs that only seemed to act as an incentive to the Goddess between her legs.

When she took her nipples between her fingers and began to squeeze and pull them, she knew from the deep, warm sensations that began to bubble up inside her that she had nearly climbed to the top. Raising her head, she looked down her front at the dark-haired woman, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sky blue eyes that had come to mean so much to her. "Joey… please… please look at me," she whispered hoarsely.

Her wish was fulfilled a few seconds later as Joey peeked up from her sweet work and locked eyes with her. The smoldering look in the blue eyes - that the Skipper sent without breaking off the contact with her tongue - was Lana's undoing and she felt a lightning bolt hit her dead center as the orgasm claimed her, making her fling her head back in unbridled ecstasy and let out a husky, raw scream that echoed through the small cabin.

Lana's scream caught Joey so much by surprise that she briefly jumped back with her heart thundering hard in her throat, but she was soon back at work, lapping up the exquisite juices that were oozing out of her blonde lover's wildly convulsing center.

Finally collapsing onto the bunk with a long, deep, trembling sigh, Lana felt her eyes almost roll back in her head, but she willed herself into staying awake and alert. "Oh… my… Gawd…" she croaked, wiping her forehead with a jittering hand.
Not sure if Lana would care for tasting herself on her lips, Joey used the bedsheet to wipe off the excess fluids from her chin, and climbed up the still quivering body until she reached the lips. Quickly claiming them, the Skipper offered her lover a few searing kisses before settling down next to her.

"So… baby… that was pretty good, huh? If not exactly takin' it slowly," Joey said, running her index finger across the flushed skin on Lana's upper chest.

"Good?" Lana croaked. "Good? Yes, it was good… I nearly fainted…"

"Mmmm," Joey said, leaning in to kiss the side of her blonde lover's head.

Lana's first orgasmic wave eventually gave way to a golden blanket that fell on her like the morning dew. Soon, she was feeling warm, sated and comfortable in Joey's arms - but then she realized something.

"Oh… Joey, I… I want to return the gift you just gave me, but… I don't really know what to do. I've never… never… actu-"

"Don't worry, baby, I'll guide you through it. But you gotta promise me that if you don't like giving it, you tell me at once and then we come up with something else for you to try. Okay? Not everyone likes doing it."

Turning over onto her left side so she could look her lover in the eye, Lana nodded a few times and began to kiss the inviting cheeks and nose in front of her. "That's a deal. Let me try it first… who knows, I might be good at it," she husked, slowly sliding down Joey's long torso.

"Oh, baby… I think you're a natural," Joey said as Lana's tongue began to circle her erect nipples.

_*._*_.*_ *

As the bell on the nearby church tower struck ten p.m., Rollie and his two fellow hoodlums stepped out of the shadows and crossed the street. It only took a few seconds to open the back door - Keyshada had already prepared it for them - and soon, the three men were sneaking up the stairs, headed for the fourth suite on the fourth floor.

By the time they reached the second floor, Tyrone suffered a near-collapse. Leaning against the elaborately painted wall underneath one of the orange lamps, he wheezed so hard that it sounded like he was about to cash in his chips.

The wheezing was so loud in the quiet stairwell that Rollie rubbed his face several times, trying to keep his temper in check. "Tyrone, you just come up when you can. Anton and me are going ahead."

"O… kay…" Tyrone said between wheezes.

Turning around, Rollie continued upwards with Anton, mumbling obscenities concerning Tyrone's parentage all the way up.

"Told ya he'd be useless!" Anton whispered, but he was cut off when Rollie slapped him in the gut.

When they reached the fourth floor, Rollie slowed down and began to move much more stealthily. Sneaking up to the corner of the stairwell, he peeked around it and down the hall.

As usual at that time of the evening, the hall was dimly lit, a fact that suited Rollie perfectly. "All right, come on," he said, grabbing hold of Anton's wifebeater.
The two hoodlums tip-toed along the hall; needlessly as it turned out, because not only did the plush, deep red carpet suck up all sound, the faint noises they did make were completely drowned out by the elevator sending out a loud DING as it landed at the floor.

"Fuck!" Rollie hissed, pushing Anton into a niche in the wall and quickly following him in.

"Rollie?" Tyrone said in a stage whisper as he stepped out of the elevator. "Where the fuck are ya, man?"

"Aw hell, that dimwit," Rollie said quietly as he stepped out of the niche. "Here, man! And keep it quiet!"

"Oh… okay," Tyrone said and walked towards them in his trademark lumbering shuffle.

"Four-four, here we are," Rollie said a little while later, putting his ear to the door. When he couldn't hear anything, he reached into his back pocket and dug out a cloned master key card that Keyshada had sold him for fifty bucks - now he'd get to see if it was worth that amount.

When the card entered the reader, it only took two seconds before the little LED light changed from red to green, meaning that the lock had disengaged. Grinning like a wolf on the prowl, Rollie turned around and locked eyes with his companions, telling them silently that the fun was about to begin.

Moving quieter than he had ever done, Rollie opened the door and peeked inside. A couple of lights were on in the living room as well as the bedroom, and the unmistakable sound of someone brushing their teeth came through loud and clear from the bathroom.

Rollie began to tip-toe into the suite but he stopped abruptly when he clearly heard the sound of a bed creaking in the bedroom. 'Two people… so the tourist must have picked up a lover boy… but who is where…? All right, that's what we've got the muscle for…'

Turning around, he waved Tyrone up to him, pointed at the bathroom and then made a hitting gesture with his hands that even the slightly dimwitted Tyrone couldn't fail to understand.

Tyrone nodded and lumbered towards the bathroom door.

Inside the bathroom, Olly thoroughly rinsed her mouth and her toothbrush and wiped her hands on a towel. Looking at herself in the mirror, she couldn't quite believe that she and Rebecca had just spent the last several hours making love, but the soreness shooting up from her well-loved center proved that they had.

Chuckling, she clicked off the bathroom lights and stepped outside, only wearing a Grandma-style nightgown that she had borrowed from Rebecca because the air condition in the hotel suite was locked to ten degrees above freezing.

Turning around to close the door, she let out a surprised grunt when she found herself face to face with a dark-skinned human mountain who stared back at her with wide, confused eyes and a very slack-jawed expression on his face.

'Fuck, that can't be her! That's… that's fuckin' Olly Rags!' Rollie thought, thinking back to the incident with the wallet he had snatched from a tourist. Olly had made a mess of his plans that day, so in a heartbeat, he decided to make a mess of her plans now, whatever they were.

Still within the first few seconds, Rollie quickly reached for a vase that was standing on a sideboard against the wall, moved past Tyrone and smashed it down on Olly's head, crushing the vase into a hundred pieces and instantly snuffing out her candle.
As Olly crumbled to the floor amidst a shower of porcelain shards, Rebecca let out a surprised howl from the bedroom and came running into the doorway. "Domini- Oh, God!" she cried out when she saw her beloved Olly lying on the floor with three men hovering above her.

Spinning around, she let out another cry and slammed the bedroom door shut.

"Tyrone, break down that fuckin' door! She's the tourist, not fuckin' Rags here!" Rollie said, pointing at the closed doors.

"Sure thing, boss," Tyrone said and broke out into something that could be described as running. The doors were no match for his considerable bulk, and as he barged through them, he completely shredded the locks on both sides.

Screaming, Rebecca dove down to try to hide under the bed, but she realized too late that she had put her suitcases there and that there wasn't any room for her. Instead, all she could do was to crawl up into a corner and pull her legs up to shield herself from the intruders, cursing the fact that she was only wearing a flimsy cotton nightgown.

"Oh, calm the fuck down, bitch. You're much more valuable to us untouchable so that's how you'll stay," Rollie said, giving his hostage a good look. "Nobody wants to fuck such a fat cow, anyway," he continued, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

Moving closer, Rollie leaned down towards Rebecca and shot her a dark, menacing look. "Where's the dinner plate?"

"Wh- what?" Rebecca stuttered, unsuccessfully shaking her head to get out of the awful nightmare she had suddenly found herself in.

"The gold dinner plate. Where is it?"

"D-down on the b-boat!"


"B-but… no!"

"Oh yeah you are… get dressed or we'll do it for ya!"

Clenching her jaw tightly, Rebecca stared at the three men with wide, frightened eyes. When she slowly realized that she had no option but to follow their command, large tears escaped from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Choking back sobs, she reached for the t-shirt and the shorts she had taken off earlier in the day and put them on - in her haste, the t-shirt was put on backwards, but she didn't have time to correct it.

"Excellent," Rollie said, reaching out for Rebecca's injured arm. "We're leaving. But one more thing… if you scream on the way out, I promise that I will hurt you. Do you know what I'm talking about, bitch?"

Unable to speak, Rebecca just nodded at the thinly veiled threat.

"That's nice. C'mon!" Rollie said and pulled the sobbing Rebecca out of the bedroom.

As they hurried past the prone Olly, Rebecca couldn't stop a choked-up cry from escaping her lips, but it earned her such an angry stare from Rollie that she forced herself to keep quiet by biting down on her tongue.
With another wonderful afterglow falling over her like a comfortable blanket after a second round of orgasms, Lana snuggled down next to her lover, soon falling into the zone between being fully awake and just drifting off to sleep.

After a little while, their breaths synchronized and their naked bodies began to move as one. When Lana noticed, she let out a little chuckle and leaned forward to place a kiss on Joey's cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered. "That was… just perfect."

"Well, thank you, baby. Like I said, you're a natural. I guess we're kinda good together, ain't we?" Joey replied in a matching whisper.

"Mmmm. A girl could get used to this."

Stillling slightly, Joey looked down at the blonde head that was resting in the nook of her shoulder. Thinking about what Lana had just said, she wondered if it meant that she had made a decision on what to do after Saturday.

'But even then, what do *you* want, Joey Swain? Was this just a little holiday fling or does it have potential to be more than that? Lana is one of the most interesting, exciting women I've had the fortune of spending some time with, but… would it work over a longer period of time? Not to mention a long distance? What would happen if she goes back to the Big Apple and you stay down here? How long do you think you could stay away from other chicas…?'

After those thoughts, Joey sighed and shuffled a little bit around on the bunk that definitely hadn't been built for two.

"Something wrong, Skip?"

"Uh… no."

Lifting her head, Lana looked up into the Skipper's blue orbs. "Well, when you say it like that, I know something's wrong…?"

"No, it's just…” - sighing again, Joey carefully moved Lana's arm off her chest and swung her legs over the side of the bunk. "Have you thought about what you want to do?" she continued, getting up to open the porthole to get some fresh air inside her cabin.

"What I want to do? Didn't we already agree on what to do about the treasure hunt?" Lana said and rolled over onto her right side to lean against the wall between Joey's cabin and the pantry.

"No, I meant regarding Saturday."

"Oh… of course. No, I haven't."

"Oh," Joey said and sat down on her chair; the coarse fabric made her bare butt and thighs itch almost at once.

"But I will. May I shower here, Skip? I mean, the indoor one?" Lana said, winking at Joey to defuse what had suddenly become a awkward situation.

"Of course, Lana."

Getting off the bed, Lana quickly closed the distance between herself and the very nude Skipper with the Navy tattoos, the fantastic breasts and the closely cropped dark patch of hair that she had recently become so intimately
acquainted with. "Thank you," she said, feeling the tingles return when she leaned down to place a nice, loving kiss on Joey's lips.

"Don't use up all my hot water, okay? I need more than you," Joey said, returning the kiss and adding a smile.

"Oh, I won't."

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Ten minutes later, Lana stepped out of the shower after having dried her body thoroughly, humming a merry little tune as she buttoned her shorts and combed her hair down into something vaguely resembling a hairdo.

In the meantime, Joey had slipped into one of the white terrycloth bathrobes she kept for her female guests, but the comical sight of the bathrobe only just reaching halfway down her arms and thighs made Lana stop and laugh out loud.

"It was chilly!" Joey whined, pulling Lana close to her, hoping to shower the blonde woman with a few wet kisses.

'Joey! Joey!' an agitated male voice suddenly shouted from outside the boat, making Joey forget all about kissing Lana. She quickly left her own cabin and went into the one Lana had used on the trip.

"What the hell is that?" Lana said and hurried after Joey.

'Joey Swain! Are you in there?' the male voice shouted, sounding even more agitated.

Quickly opening the porthole, Joey stuck her head outside to see what was going on. On the pier, Everett Pearce was pacing back and forth, wearing his uniform jacket over a blue sweatsuit.

"Everett? What the flying…?"

"Joey! Thank God you're here!" Everett said, racing over to the porthole. "Olly has been taken to the Regional Medical Center!"

"What? What the fuck…?"

"They just phoned me… she said she was attacked at the hotel by three men. They banged her up pretty badly… she's got a concussion. She says that the bastards took the person she was with!"

"They- they what? They took Rebecca?" Joey said, suddenly realizing that she had just entered a gruesome, grotesque, living nightmare.

"They what?!" Lana shouted from somewhere behind Joey, but the Skipper didn't have time to explain.

"The punks on the mopeds! For fuck's sake, Everett, it's the punks on the mopeds! Lan- uh, m- my guest saw them earlier this evening."

"Oh… I know who you're talking about, Joey. I'll go up to the city and look around for them. Are you going up to the hosp-"

"But of course I am! Thanks, Everett," Joey said and slammed the porthole shut.
She was already on her way out of the door when Lana grabbed hold of her with both hands, pulling the much heavier woman to a reluctant stop. "Look, Lana-"

"I was thinking that you might want to get dressed…!"

"Oh… yeah. Thanks," Joey said and quickly shed the bathrobe before heading into her own cabin.

* * *

CHAPTER 10

Hurrying through the sliding doors at the Regional Medical Center, Lana and the Skipper looked around in a daze, trying to locate the information desk or the Emergency Room.

"Shit," Joey said, pointing at a sign on the information desk that said 'Open six a.m. to ten p.m.'. "What time is it? I didn't get my watch."

"It's twenty to eleven, Joey," Lana said, quickly checking her wristwatch.

"Typical. Oh, where the hell did they put that damn ER…?" the Skipper said, moving around in circles to find a sign or a display that could lead them to Olly - without luck, as every corridor was identical to the others, consisting of gray linoleum floors, white walls and plenty of frosted glass.

Chewing her fingernails, Lana almost got dizzy from looking at Joey spinning around, so she went over to a large directory on the wall and began to study it. "Haven't you been here before?"

"Only once and that was years ago… shit."

"Joey! Look," Lana said, pointing at the directory. "The ER isn't in this building… it's in a separate entrance around the corner."

"Shit!" Joey barked and hurried back out of the hospital wing, leaving a confused Lana in her wake.

Groaning, Lana threw her hands in the air and followed the Skipper outside.

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The next wing proved to be the right one and they could hear Olly grumbling loudly the second they went through the sliding doors. This time, the information desk was still manned, and Lana hurried over to it to get the exact location of the Emergency Room.

Half a minute later, Joey whooshed open a gray door and entered the ward, stopping with a jerk when she saw no less than eight people with various injuries sitting on chairs, waiting for a doctor or a nurse to come and assess them.

The Emergency Room was held in bright, tropical colors - mostly reds, oranges and greens - and it was large enough to handle fifty patients at any given time. There were clusters of tables and chairs everywhere, a colorful play pen in one of the corners, and they even had plastic palm trees to act as shade from the overhead strip lights.
The eight people sitting in the Emergency Room all looked up at Joey and Lana, hoping to see new, interesting injuries, but they all turned back to their books and old magazines when they realized that the two new arrivals weren't affected by any maladies.

When a young nurse walked into the room holding a tray loaded with several types of medicine, Joey hurried over to her. "Nurse, would you happen to know where Oll… uh, Dominique Hofstaedter is at?" she said, grabbing hold of the nurse's sleeve.

"Yes, Miss Hofstaedter is in room two, but I'm afraid you can't go in there right now."

"And why the hell not?" Joey growled, making the nurse take a precautionary step back.

"Because Miss Hofstaedter is still receiving treatment for several scalp lacerations, Miss…?"

"Swain. Joey Swain. All right… we'll wait. Do you know her condition?"

"Oh, when Miss Hofstaedter was brought in, she was bleeding from several cuts and bruises on the top of her head. I'm not aware of the cause of the injuries. But, uh… considering the language she's resorted to on a number of occasions, I'd say she's mostly fine, apart from a light concussion."

"Well, that's something at least. Look, nurse, could you tell her that Joey and Lana are out here, waiting for her?"

"Please?" Lana interjected, nudging Joey in the ribs.

"Please?" Joey echoed.

"Oh, I certainly could, Miss Swain. I need to distribute this tray first, but Miss Hofstaedter will be next on my list," the nurse said and excused herself with a smile.

"O… kay," Joey said, scratching her hair. Shrugging, she took Lana by the hand and went over to one of the tables. Pulling out a chair for herself and the Skipper, Lana sat down and crossed her legs. She picked up a six months old copy of a Young 2Day fashion magazine and began to leaf through it, but quickly threw it back down on the table when it couldn't hold her interest. "Joey, I think we've been cursed. Ever since we found that gold dinner plate, all sorts of things have happened to us… bad things!"

"Mmmm. You could be right about that," Joey said, nervously killing time by cracking her knuckles, one louder than the next.

Looking decidedly gray around the gills, Lana jumped up from the chair and began to pace back and forth in the emergency room. "Oh, I'm so worried, Joey… why did they take Rebecca? Of all people, why Rebecca? Did they think she was me? Are they trying to extort money from my father? What's going to happen when they find out that Rebecca isn't me…?"

"I don't kn-"

"Perhaps… Yes! The bouncer down at the Bait and Spear… what was his name? The big guy? I'm sure he'll know them! Maybe if we went down there and asked him, he could give us some names!"

"Barrett? Barrett's got the hots for Olly, too. He doesn't have anything to do with this, that's a Goddamned guarantee, Lana," Joey said surly.
"I didn't say he had, I said he could help us. Oh, I can't wait any longer… I need to do someth-
" Lana said and began to move towards the exit, but Joey jumped up and grabbed hold of her.

"Wait… just wait a moment, will ya? Are you seriously suggesting that you're gonna walk from here to the Bait and Spear at eleven flippin' p.m. when there are kidnappers on the prowl who are probably looking for you? Have you popped a funny pill when I wasn't looking?"

"Oh, but I have to do something!" Lana said and rubbed her face.

The nurse Joey and Lana had spoken to earlier came back out of the back rooms and put down a new tray with medicine. "Miss Swain? You and your friend can see Miss Hofstaedter now," she said, pointing at a corridor that led off from the main Emergency Room.

"Thank you, nurse," Joey said before turning back to Lana. "One thing at a time, okay? First we talk to Olly, then we go look for Rebecca."

Sighing with a few tears stinging her eyes, Lana looked towards the heavens for guidance. When nothing came to her, she nodded and followed the Skipper down the corridor.

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"Olly?" Joey said, whooshing open the door to room two.

Olly was sitting on a hospital bed wearing a blue gown the nurses had provided for her. Most of her head had been wrapped in a stark white bandage, giving her a faintly East Indian look and making her already dark skin look almost pitch black. In her hand, she was holding a fabric carrier bag with the ruined, blood-stained nightgown she had worn when she was brought in.

Looking to her right, Olly's face lit up in something approaching relief when she recognized her visitors. "Jesus, Skipper, I'm so glad to see you! Those miserable bastards took my Rebecca!" Olly said and wanted to jump off the bed, but a nurse came running into the room and prevented her from doing so.

"No, Miss Hofstaedter," the matron of the ward said - a stern looking St. Thomas native in her late fifties - as she pushed Olly back on the bed, "I've just told you that you have to remain in bed for the next six hours."

"Aw hell, nurse! Six hours?!

"Standard operating procedure for concussions, Miss Hofstaedter. Anymore nonsense out of you and I'll sedate you!" the nurse said, sounding very much like she meant it.

Groaning, and realizing that she was actually fairly dizzy, Olly relented and sat down again. After a few seconds, she swung her legs up on the bed and reclined very tenderly.

"Looks like you're left holding the bag, Olly," Joey said, walking up to the bed and giving her best friend a strong handshake.

"Yeah, no shit. Literally," Olly said, holding up the bag with her bloodied clothes. "Three guys, one the size of a flippin' Jumbo jet and two smaller ones were suddenly in our room. I don't know what the hell happened…"

Walking up to the bed, Lana reached out and put her hand on Olly's arm. "Hi, Olly. I promise that we'll do all we can to get Rebecca back. I'm sure she's fine…"
"Oh, she better be. That's all I'm saying," Olly grumbled, but reached up to give Lana's hand a little squeeze. "Anyway, when I woke up, I could see that the doors to the bedroom had been smashed open and that Rebecca was gone. The front door was untouched, by the way. They must have had some kind of… I don't know… something. Whatever it was, they hadn't done anything to the front door."

"Mmmm," Joey said, storing all the information in her rapidly-moving brain.

Sighing, Olly shrugged and began to scratch the edge of the bandage that had already begun to irritate her. "I was bleeding kinda badly, so I went down to the reception desk and had the night clerk call an ambulance and Everett so he could contact you."

"Oh… why not the police as well, Olly?" Lana said, looking like a big question mark.

"Pah… 'cos the cop on the night shift, Parker, is a lazy bum. That's why. The hotel staff quietly sealed the suite. They don't want any bad publicity."

"Oh… but… I'm sure that even a lazy cop would react to a kidnapping…?" Lana said, puzzled.

Grunting, Joey ignored Lana for the time being and gave Olly another strong handshake. "Olly, just stay cool. We'll look for Rebecca. Once they release you, head down to the Argo and wait for us. Okay? We kinda left in a hurry so I didn't have time to get my phone, but we'll go back for it right now."

Olly sighed and stared straight up at the impersonal strip lights in the stark white ceiling. "All right. But we better find Rebecca fast… I wouldn't put anything past those bastards. Find her… please…?"

"We'll find her, Olly," Joey said, trying not to stare at the tears that had formed in the corners of the usually so tough mechanic's eyes.

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The smell of coffee beans inside the old canvas sack Rebecca had over her head was so strong that she could hardly breathe. Constantly choking, she tried to struggle against the pieces of rope that kept her wrists and ankles firmly attached to a metal chair, but she wasn't strong enough.

Around her, she could hear the three hoodlums strutting about, bragging loudly and pretending to be much tougher men that they really were.

Choking again, the headache that had threatened to break out arrived in full force, and she let out a brief whimper. "Please… please! I c-can't breathe!" she croaked, trying to shake her head to get some air in underneath the sack.

From one second to the next, the uncomfortable darkness was replaced by an even more uncomfortable wall of light as the canvas sack was pulled off her head. Slamming her eyes shut to protect them from the harsh light that came from a naked bulb hanging down from the ceiling, Rebecca gulped down several lungfuls of fresh air, knowing that she might not get another chance any time soon.

As Rollie watched the panting woman, loose fragments of a thought tried to form at the back of his mind, but it refused to go any further than a collection of disconnected threads. He knew something had gone wrong, but he couldn't work out what it could be.

Feeling a lot less sure of himself than he had been when he had come up with the plan to kidnap the woman, she shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and walked up behind his victim.
"Listen up, you fat fuck. We don't want much from you… just that you call your big Daddy back home and get him to send down some money. When we count the green, he'll get his precious, little, piggy back. How's that sound?"

'Ooh, God… they think I'm Lana…!' Rebecca thought, feeling an ice cold sense of fear race up and down her spine. With her heart thundering away in her chest, she had trouble getting her brain to function, but a single thought managed to get through the haze - 'What are they going to do when they find out I'm not Lana…?'

Rebecca slowly opened her eyes and began to look around her temporary prison. She appeared to be in a very rundown apartment. Save from a few, tattered pieces of furniture, the room was bare, with a bare wooden floor, bare walls where the plaster was cracking in several places, and a window where two of the four small panes were cracked.

From her position, she couldn't see anything out of the window, but she remembered that they had dragged her up what had felt like three or four flights of wooden stairs.

"How does that sound, Miss Piggy?" Rollie said, giving Rebecca a shove in the back.

Somewhere in the distance, Rebecca heard the familiar sound of the bell in the church tower strike eleven p.m., but it sounded fainter than it had at the hotel.

"O-okay. I'll c-call h-him… p-please don't hurt me…!"

"Oh, we won't. We're good little boy scouts, ain't that right, homeys?" Rollie said, regaining some of his bluster.

"Phone," he said and put out his hand.

Tyrone handed Rollie a cell phone that he flipped open at once. "What's the number?" he said to Rebecca. When she didn't answer at once, he walked around her and shoved his face into hers. "What's. The. Number?"

Behind them, Anton was standing at the window sill, surfing the Internet on his brand new, stolen, laptop when he suddenly let out a grunt. "Hey, uh, dude…? Dude?"

"What the fuck now?"

"You better come take a look at this, man," Anton said and turned the laptop around so Rollie could see what was on the monitor.

Growling, Rollie went over to the laptop and pushed Anton out of the way. Moving his lips as he read from the website, he suddenly slapped his forehead with such force that Anton jumped a foot in the air. "Of course, man! Fuck! Lana Ferguson's thirtieth birthday extravaganza… no way Miss Piggy is only thirty," he said in a voice that slowly trailed off into nothing.

Turning around slowly, Rollie studied the frightened woman who was sitting on the chair, visibly shivering.

"That's not Lana Ferguson," Rollie said flatly, earning himself two identical, surprised groans from his fellow hoodlums and a terrified whimper from Rebecca.

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Five minutes past eleven, Joey and Lana opened the door to the police station and walked up a short flight of stairs to get to the squad room.
Putting her hand on the handle of an inner door, Joey turned around and shot Lana a pointed look. "I'll do the talking. Officer Parker can appear uncaring and lazy… mostly because he is… but he's also well-connected. He probably knows the names and the hangouts of the three hoodlums you saw, but if we corner him, he'll oyster up. Okay?"

"So you're saying we need to sweet-talk a cop? Or pussyfoot around the fact that a very, very dear friend of ours is missing and probably in grave danger?" Lana growled with her Irish green eyes shooting fire at the Skipper. "Hm! I've always had a strong conviction that the police were there for the well-being of the citizens!"

"Lana… I'm just as nervous about Rebecca's safety as you are, but we've got to play our cards right," Joey said quietly.

Sighing and rolling her eyes, Lana made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "Oh… all right. You'll do the talking."

Joey opened the frosted glass door and stepped inside the squad room. At first glance, it looked like any other small police station, with a large reception desk just inside the door, a row of five smaller desks off to the right, strip lights in the ceiling, a dark gray linoleum floor and pale gray walls that were adorned with several colorful posters advertising various anti-crime campaigns from the past few years.

The air in the room was quite stuffy and dusty, mostly because none of the four windows to the street could be opened.

A TV was on in a small side room, tuned to a station showing the local news. At the other end of the squad room, a solitary uniform jacket and a shiny cap were hanging on a coat rack with room for ten jackets, evidence that the police station was only manned by a single officer at that time of night.

"He's probably watching the news," Joey said and walked towards the TV room; her sneakers making squeaky sounds as she crossed the gray linoleum floor. "Oh… good evening, Miss Swain. I'll be with you shortly. Please wait outside."

Turning his attention back to his coffee, Warren filled the mug with hot water and began to stir the concoction quite meticulously. Once the mix was to his liking, he added a single sugar cube and a dash of milk and stirred even more.

While all that was going on, Lana's face was growing redder by the second and she was biting hard down on her tongue to stop the barb that was practically rolling around in her mouth.

Noticing, Joey put her hands on Lana's shoulders, turned her around and led her over to the nearest desk where she deposited her on the vacant chair.

A few seconds later, Officer Parker came out of the TV room and sat down behind the same desk. "How may I help you? Have you had a burglary on your boat?"

"Not quite, Officer Parker. I fear that one of my guests has been kidnapped."

"Hm," Parker said, but didn't appear to be doing anything else than stirring his coffee. "And you're sure she hasn't just found herself a little holiday fling somewhere and forgot to tell you?"
"Quite sure, Sir. The kidnapping took place at the Long Bay Resort Hotel just over an hour ago," Joey said and sat down on the other chair. "There were three kidnappers. One of them injured my mechanic, Olly Rags, quite badly. You know Olly, don't you, Sir?"

"Hm. The Long Bay Resort… hm. Big place, big pile of paperwork. So Olly was injured?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've only met her once or twice, but I knew her maternal uncle quite well when he worked at the shipyard. So… three kidnappers?"

Lana opened her mouth and drew a deep breath, but before she had time to speak, Joey had put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, Sir. This is Lana Ferguson, my other guest. She believes she saw the kidnappers when they were plotting their crime."

"Hm," Parker said and took a sip of his coffee. "Can you give me a description, Miss Ferguson?"

Mentally jumping up and down in frustration over the police officer's far too laid back attitude, Lana nearly let slip a curse, but kept it back at the last moment. "Uh, yes Sir. Two of them were young men, probably early twenties. One was Afro-Caribbean and one was white. They were both wearing white wifebeaters and blue jeans, and they were sharing a moped."

Parker arched an eyebrow when Lana mentioned the moped, and he leaned forward and took his notepad, suddenly a bit more interested in the case. "Go on," he said when he noticed that Lana had stopped.

"Well, while I was watching them, they were joined by a third man, also an Afro-Caribbean. Probably a few years older. He was very large, or rather, very overweight. He also drove a moped."

"Hm."

"Sir, please… my friend is missing," Lana said and moved to the edge of the chair. "Her name is Rebecca Stern and she must be horror-stricken about now. Please, we need to do something!"

"Do you have any idea why your friend was taken, Miss Ferguson?" Parker said, scribbling away in the notepad.

"I… I think it's a case of mistaken identity. I have a feeling the kidnappers thought Rebecca was me. You see, uh… my father is… uh, a merchant banker in New York City."

"With enough money to pay a ransom?"

"Uh… yes."

"And what is your relation to Miss Stern?"

"She's my father's secretary, sent here to…" 'To protect me,' Lana thought, feeling a bitter taste fill her mouth. "Uh… to act as a sort of chaperone on my treasure hunt."

"Treasure hunt?" Parker said to Joey. "I thought you were a fishing tour operator?"

"We also do scuba diving."
"Oh. All right. First of all, you're welcome to come back in forty-eight hours and fill out a missing persons form, but-"

"Forty-?!" Lana started to say, but Joey immediately clamped her hand down on her thigh, causing her to slam her mouth shut.

"Yes. But going by your description, it very much sounds like Rollie Hill, Anton Kozzak and Tyrone Fuller could be involved somehow. Now, I believe that they're known to frequent the Rocking Bull. Nasty place, that. I wouldn't be able to get a peep out of the barflies there, but if you showed up, Miss Swain… well, that could be a different story."

"The Rocking Bull, Sir?" Joey said, already on her way up from the chair.

"Mmmm."

"All right. Thank you, Officer. If there's no news, we'll return in forty-eight hours," the Skipper continued, pulling a mortified Lana to her feet.

"You're very welcome, Miss Swain," Officer Parker said and took a sip of his coffee.

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Once Joey and Lana were down on the street, Lana buried her face in her hands and let out a long, trembling sigh. "Joey… please explain to me what just happened…? Please tell me that we're not going to wait for forty-eight frickin' hours!? Rebecca could be dead and buried by then!"

"Of course we're not gonna wait, Lana. First, I'm gonna call Olly and tell her what we've learned, then I'm gonna call Barrett and ask him to meet us at the Rocking Bull. I've never been in there, but I know it's a real rat hole. They won't like us asking questions so we need all the backup we can get," Joey said and snatched her cell phone from her pocket.

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At the same time across town, Rollie felt like banging his head against the wall from the verbal abuse he was taking from the person at the other end of the line. "Yes, Mr. Cassilano, I did hear you say that we should forget it, but… Yes, Mr. Cassilano. Yes, Mr. Cassilano… No, Mr. Cassilano, I don't know if we can get the gold dinner plate… Aw, fuck it," he continued, terminating the connection in Carlo Cassilano's ear.

"What' he say, dude?" Anton said, chewing so hard on his fingernails that he had drawn blood on four different fingers.

"That we're fucked."

"Well, I coulda' guessed that already…"

Sitting on the tattered couch at the other side of the room, Tyrone patted his considerable gut and let out a resounding belch. "Hey, when are we gonna get something to eat? I'm starvin' here!"

"Will you shut the fuck up about eating, fathead!" Rollie said and threw an empty beer can at his large friend who responded by grabbing his crotch and shooting Rollie a dirty look.
Rebecca sat completely still in the middle of all the insanity, not daring to say a word or even look at her three captors. Instead, she was staring at a spot on the floor that was a dark brown splotch of something she didn't even want to know what was.

She was thankful that Rollie hadn't put the stinking coffee sack back over her head, but at the same time, she knew that it probably meant that they didn't know what to do with her - and even though they hadn't said each other's names yet, she had seen their faces, which would obviously be more than enough to identify them later on.

'If there is a 'later on' for me…' she thought, sighing deeply through her teeth. When the sickening crash she had heard when she was still in bed was replayed in her mind, she had to swallow back a groan. Already then, she had known that something was wrong.

Thinking back to the terrifying events, she realized that all the derogatory language the leader of the gang had used regarding her figure hadn't hurt her as much as seeing Dominique lying bleeding on the floor of the hotel suite.

'Oh God, I hope she's all right… how is it possible to fall so head over heels in love with someone you've only known for… for… three days…? If it hadn't happened to me, I would never have believed it…' Rebecca thought and sighed again.

Unbeknownst to Rebecca, Rollie was staring at her behind her back, thinking about how he and his buddies could get out of the sticky mess they had found themselves in. Pushing his chair back, he shot to his feet and grabbed his wallet. "I'm going for some brew. I need to think clearly."

"And some chow, bro! I need something to eat, man!" Tyrone said from the couch.

"Eat your fuckin' arm," Rollie said as he slammed the front door behind him.

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Fifteen minutes later, Rollie came back carrying two six-packs of beer and a small bag of potato chips. Throwing his wallet and the chips on a table, he tore the first beer out of the plastic holder and cracked it open.

Once he had gulped down half of the contents, he threw the chips at Tyrone. "Here's your chow, bro."

"What the fuck… Salty Twisters? Ya couldn't have taken a bag of pork rinds instead, man?"

"Hey, if ya don't want 'em…?"

"Didn't say that," Tyrone said and tore open the bag, making a handful of the twisters fly off in all directions.

"Dude…" Anton said, looking longingly at the beer. "What are we gonna do about her?"

Hearing that, Rebecca clenched her jaw, hoping against hope that the leader of the gang would set her free.

"Haven't figured that out yet, man. Here, catch," Rollie said and threw a can of beer at Anton.

"Thanks, dude," Anton said and cracked it open.

After Rollie had emptied his first beer, his head hadn't yet cleared sufficiently, so he went straight over and took the next.

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A little while later, half of the beer had already been consumed and the mood had changed for the worse.

Rebecca had a bad case of the creeps crawling around her body from the things the increasingly intoxicated men were crowing about, like various ways to dispose of a dead body, or how to silence someone permanently by slicing their vocal cords.

"Naw, I got it," Rollie said in a slow, beery voice, looking directly at Rebecca. "We could throw the fat fuck out of the window just to see if she'd bounce. Do you think she'd bounce, boys?"

"Dunno," Anton said, sitting on the floor and eating two of the Salty Twisters that had fallen out when Tyrone had opened the bag.

"One thing's for sure. We won't get no money out of big daddy for her. Not a fuckin' dime," Rollie said and crushed an empty can between his fingers.

Sitting up straight, Tyrone began to scratch his large head, looking like he was trying to string a sentence together. "Uh… uh… bro, if we can't get any money for her… then why the fuck haven't we let her go?"

Rollie aimed and threw the crushed can at Rebecca, hitting her on her shin. "'Cos she's seen our faces," he said as the church bell struck midnight.

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Half past midnight, Joey and Lana slipped into the shadows across the street from the Rocking Bull.

Looking at the seedy bar that appeared so rundown that it was a miracle it was still standing, Lana let out a low whistle. "Whoa… and I thought the Bait and Spear looked bad. That was Caesar's Palace compared to this dump!" she whispered.

"Mmmm," Joey mumbled, looking down the street for Barrett's easily recognizable figure.

A few minutes later, the large man came walking towards them with surprising agility. He had changed into a black commando-style sweater, black jeans and black army boots, and his colorful Rasta-cap had been traded for a black beret.

"Whoa…" Lana said again, feeling goosebumps break out all over her body from the no-nonsense meanness exuding from the bouncer.

Instead of being awed by her large friend's presence, Joey rolled her eyes repeatedly at the sight of the person walking next to Barrett - none other than Olly Rags, wearing one of her trademark boiler suits.

"Oh fer Pete's sakes," Joey mumbled, punching her fist into the palm of her hand.

"Wait a minute, isn't that…?" Lana said, peeking around Joey's broad shoulders.

"Yes, it is. Stay here, Lana," the Skipper said and slipped away from the shadows before Lana could even open her mouth to complain.

Fast closing the distance between them, Joey shook her fist at Olly who responded by grinning. "Olly Rags, you dumb broad! Don't you have a concussion? What the hell are you doing here?" Joey whispered hoarsely.
"My girlfriend may be in there," Olly answered in a matching whisper, pointing at the Rocking Bull. "Would you stay at the hospital if it was Lana? No? So shut up, Skip. I'm okay."

Chuckling, Joey pulled her friend into a hug, mindful of not touching her head that was still bandaged up to make her look like a soothsayer at a county fair. "Yeah, yeah, I know. What did you do to the matron of the ward?"

"Nothing. When her shift ended, a couple of minutes went by without anyone attending to me. I slipped out and went back to the Argo to change. My new boiler suit is still up at the hotel so I had to take an old one."

"Hi, Joey." Barrett said once he could get a word in edgewise, shaking hands with the Skipper. "Olly called me just after you did. I went down to the boat to pick her up. It's our first date," the bouncer said with a broad grin.

"Uh yeah, sort of," Olly said, winking at Joey. "Anyway, enough of that... what's the score here?"

"Fuck-all at this point. We were down at the police station and spoke to Parker. As expected, there wasn't anything he could do about it, but he let it slip that the assholes in question have been known to hang out here," Joey said and pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "Hence you, big fella," she continued, slapping Barrett's gut.

"I'm ready to bust heads if we have to. It's always funny to bust dirtbag heads," the bouncer said in his rumbling voice.

"Well, the night is still young. We go in, we find someone who wants to talk to us, we get the info, we go find Rebecca," Joey said, nodding as she spoke.

"And then we kick the living snot out of the kidnappers," Olly added flatly.

Putting her hand on Olly's elbow, Joey turned around and began to move back towards the Rocking Bull. "Uh-huh. Come, Lana is waiting in the shadows."

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As the four very different individuals stepped into the seedy bar, a stony, pregnant silence fell over the place. The bartflies, gamblers and assorted other male and female denizens of the night stared at the unusual visitors, especially at the petite, delicate Lana who was sticking out like a sore thumb compared to the three tall, beefy people that accompanied her.

"I feel like a side of beef at an auction... or a lamb on her way to her slaughter," she whispered out of the corner of her mouth, but Joey just patted her shoulder reassuringly.

The four visitors slowly made their way up to the bar counter, passing countless people who - judging by the look in their eyes - would much rather see them drop dead where they stood.

The Rocking Bull was a dark, gloomy tavern that reeked of sweat, stale beer, cheap perfume, cannabis and a few unidentifiable substances. Much like the Bait and Spear, everything was made of wood and held in dark brown colors, but the Rocking Bull had none of the charm found at Miguel's place.

Walking through the crowded bar room, Lana had to hold her breath the entire distance to the counter and the mulatto thirty-something bartender who was eyeing them warily - there was so much smoke in the air that if she had attempted to breathe, she would've had a coughing attack at once.

"Hey," Joey said as she leaned against the counter.
The bartender's only reply was a grunt.

"You wouldn't happen to know where we could find Rollie Hill, would ya?"

"No," the bartender said, dunked a glass in a bowl of filthy, beer-stained water and began to polish it off.

"Oh. How about Anton Kozzak or Tyrone Fuller?"

"Tyrone? It's way past his bedtime. Big ugly fat fella… no offence," the bartender said, realizing that Barrett Gittins was even larger than Tyrone.

"None taken. Yet," Barrett answered, showing the bartender his full set of pearly whites.

"You see, chump," Olly said, zeroing in on the bartender with such a look of menace in her eyes that the man gulped visibly and took a step back, "a friend of mine was taken from her hotel room earlier tonight. And if we don't find her P-D-Q, some people are gonna be hurtin' tomorrow… catch my drift?"

Befuddled by the mechanic's menacing look, the bartender dunked the same glass into the filthy water all over again. When he realized what he had done, his jaw began to grind. "Look, I don't know what the hell you're talking about, woman," he growled as he wiped off the glass one more time.

"You obviously have a hearing problem," Joey said casually.

Barrett nodded and began to stretch out his arms.

The bartender's eyes grew wide at the silent threat, and he nearly dropped the glass on the floor. "Uh… Rollie has a cousin… she might know s-something."

"And where can we find her?" Joey said.

"At the h-hotel. She's working at the reception desk."

That piece of information made Lana stare at the bartender with a wide open expression on her face. A few seconds later, the surprise gave way to a shot of red, hot anger, and she clenched her fists and began to sneer at the man, making him take another step back. "It's her, Joey! She's involved… she was the phone operator… I called my Dad and told him about the gold plate. I also told her my suite number when I ordered the coffee! She's the one we need to talk to!" she growled through clenched teeth, ignoring the suffocating smoke that swirled around her nose.

"Mmmm. Okay," Joey said and put a calming hand on Lana's back. Turning towards the bartender, she offered him a wolf-like smile that held a promise of plenty of pain if he didn't cooperate. "And where can we find his cousin, eh?"

"How the hell should I know…? She just comes in now and again. I guess the hotel gotta keep some kind of record of their employees or something…" the bartender said, spinning around to get away from the four visitors.

"All right… Lana, you're coming with me, we're going to the hotel," Joey said in a determined voice. "There must be someone we can talk to there. Olly, do you need any of the stuff you left behind in the suite?"

"Uh, not really, Skip," Olly said, scratching her itchy turban-like bandage.

"Okay. Barrett?"

"I'll just wait below."
"Okay. Let's go. We're a step closer to finding Rebecca," Joey said and strode back towards the exit with the rest of her unlikely posse in tow.

...*

*Knock, knock! - Knock, knock!*

'Keyshada? Are you in there? It's Joey Swain and associates. We'd like a word with you if ya don't mind!'

*Knock, knock! - Knock, knock!*

'Keyshada?'

*Knock, knock! - Knock, knock!*

Jerking upright in her bed, Keyshada Hill rubbed her face and grabbed her alarm clock to see what time it was - twenty past one, a.m. When the person at the door continued to knock, she hurriedly swept her blanket aside, grabbed a thin cotton bathrobe and went out to answer it.

Even before she looked through the small spy glass, she felt in her bones that Rollie had finally done something so awful that it had brought her down with him. With her heart beating very fast, she stood up on tip-toes and put her eye to the little lens.

What she saw made her blood freeze over - not only was it the blonde tourist from the hotel, but she had enough muscle with her to tear Keyshada in half if it pleased her.

Trying to think, Keyshada began to hyperventilate, and she had to lean forward and put her hands on her knees to get herself to calm down.

Her first thought was to jump out of a window, but realized that the fall from her second floor apartment could break her legs or worse - then she thought about the aluminum baseball bat she had under her bed for protection, but even that wouldn't be enough to stop the wall of people outside.

Amidst increasingly frantic knocking, Keyshada came to the conclusion that she might as well get it over with. Sighing deeply - and cursing Rollie to the darkest levels of hell - she unlocked her door and stepped aside.

When the door was opened, Joey glared steely-eyed at the frightened young woman standing inside, not feeling the least bit of sympathy for the fact that she was shivering.

Olly was even less accommodating. Tearing through the opened door, she grabbed hold of the lapels of Keyshada's bathrobe and pressed the far slighter woman up against the nearest wall. "Where. Is. Rebecca? Don't make me ask you again, girl," she said with her face shoved directly into Keyshada's.

Keyshada's eyes darted wildly between the four people who filed into her apartment and closed the door behind them. The mood in the small hallway couldn't have been more oppressive, and as Keyshada opened her mouth to speak, everyone seemed to hold their breath.
"I d-don't kn-know…"

"Wrong answer!" Olly growled, applying so much pressure to the lapels that the thin bathrobe was torn open at the back.

"No! D-don't hurt me! I really d-don't kn-know where sh-she is!"

Stepping forward, Lana tried to calm the waters by offering the frightened young girl a faint, dead-tired smile. "What's your name?"

"Keyshada."

"Well, Keyshada, why don't you tell us what's going on here? From the top, please."

"And that means now," Olly said.

Gulping loudly, Keyshada closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look into Olly's face of doom that was mere inches from her own. "I listened in when you called New York. I… I was tempted by the g-gold dinner plate… or the money… after you had left, I went over to the Rocking Bull and talked to my cousin, Rollie. I don't know what he's done! I swear to God! I- I just wanted him to break into your suite and steal the dinner plate… that's the truth!"

"Well, he broke into a suite, all right. And he fuckin' went and kidnapped a woman! My fuckin' girlfriend! Do you know how that makes me feel?" Olly growled, forcing Keyshada hard up against the wall. "Huh? Huh?!"

"I- I… I'm so-sorry… I just wanted the gold plate!"

"Where does Rollie live, Keyshada?" Joey said.

"119 Chilton Street. Th-third floor! B- but he's got a knife… and I think maybe he's got a revolver, too…! He's definitely got a knife!"

Nodding, Joey opened the door and gave Barrett a gentle shove in the back to let the big guy know that he could start going down the stairs. Lana quickly ran after him, thankful for being able to escape the unpleasant atmosphere.

"Thanks for the warning," Joey continued, putting her hand on Olly's taut upper arm to let her know that the show was over. "Of course, you're not gonna call your cousin, are ya? I don't think it would be good for your health. Especially now when you have to look for a new job. Good luck finding one, by the way. I'm quite sure none of the hotels would want a crook working for them."

When Olly let Keyshada go, the frightened woman slid down the wall, ending up on the floor where she quickly rolled herself up into a trembling, little ball.

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"So," Olly said once they were standing down on the street. "Now we go rescue Rebecca."

Stepping in between the tall, beefy people, Lana held up her arms in a gesture that said that she wanted everyone to take a step back and re-assess the situation. "Wait… please wait, everybody. Before we go to war, shouldn't we inform the police? I mean… this is police business. You heard Keyshada, she thinks Rollie has a weapon."

"You gotta be kiddin', Lana!" Olly said, clenching her fists.
"No, she's got a point," Joey interjected, earning herself a dark glare from Olly. "Before we go to war, there's something we gotta do. But it's not involving the police."

Angrily grinding her jaw, Olly suddenly looked up, realizing what the Skipper meant. "The footlocker?"

"Yes. Barrett, thanks for giving us a helping hand. We can handle it the rest of the way," Joey said and shook hands with the big bouncer.

"Anytime, Joey. Keep me posted, okay? Uh… Olly," Barrett said and took off his black beret. "I hope you'll find Rebecca safe and sound. It's kinda obvious how much she means to you," he said and pulled the mechanic into a crushing hug.

"Ooof! Thanks, big fella," Olly said, adjusting her bandage.

Turning around, Joey began to stride back down the street, clearly headed for the harbor and the Argo.

"Okay… will somebody please explain to me where we're going? And what's so special about the damn footlocker?" Lana said. Throwing her hands in the air when no one offered a reply, she followed her friends down the street, constantly letting out an impressive flow of distinctly blue language.

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**CHAPTER 11**

Holding her breath, Rebecca sawed away on the string of rope that was holding her right wrist in place by moving it up and down the frame of the chair - or rather, a burr on the frame she had found by accident.

Pausing momentarily to check her surroundings, she could see that her three captors had all succumbed to the beer and were snoozing on the couch.

Even though her fingers were growing numb and her head was swimming with fatigue, she resumed sawing away at the bindings, determined to break free or die trying.

Several minutes later, she was no closer to freedom, but the ligaments in her shoulder felt like they were on fire from repeating the same motion so often, and she knew she had to take a break from the strenuous work before she'd be so numb that she couldn't do it at all.

Panting hard, she tried to swallow the bitter taste of disappointment that slowly bubbled up inside her. While she was catching her breath, she began thinking back to the events that had taken place in the suite - especially finding Olly's prone body. 'God, what if Dominique is still unconscious…? What if no one has found her…? There was blood in her hair… she could bleed to death if no one finds her… I wonder how long I've been here? I know I heard the church bell strike one, but… Please, God, please let Dominique be all right.'

Large, salty tears escaped Rebecca's puffy eyes and ran down her cheeks, tickling her very gently as they let go of her skin to drip down into her lap. Taking a deep, trembling breath, she was glad that her captors hadn't seen her cry - she was sure they would have used it against her.

Deciding to try again, Rebecca resumed the sawing motion; up and down, up and down, up and down, always going fairly slowly so her movements wouldn't stir the three slumbering men.
Without warning, the rope holding her right wrist snapped in two, giving her such a shock that she nearly fell sideways off the chair when she could suddenly move her arm freely.

Rebecca felt like singing her joy from the rooftops, but clenched her jaw firmly shut instead. For the first time in several hours, she moved her hand up into her lap, simply to see if it was still attached after the hard work.

After looking briefly at the three hoodlums to see if they had noticed anything, she reached down and began to unravel the rope that held her right ankle in place.

A minute later, she moved her leg outward, grimacing in pain as her knee joint cracked loudly, protesting against sitting in the same position for so long.

She could literally taste her freedom, but she knew it could be fatal for her if she rushed things, so she calmly leaned down - or as calmly as she could considering she was a quivering mess - and began to unravel the rope on her left ankle.

When both her ankles were free, she moved around on the chair as quietly as she could, leaned to her left and began to remove the rope from her wrist. With her heart thundering away in her ears and her fingers simply refusing to cooperate, removing the last piece of rope took her nearly as long as both ankles had done put together.

Finally free, she got up from the chair and wobbled over to the door on very stiff legs, hoping that she didn't step on any squeaky floorboards. Turning left in a dark, narrow hallway, she quickly found the front door - but stopped dead in her tracks when she realized that Rollie was smarter than he appeared.

The front door was blocked by a chair that had been jammed up against the handle, and on the seat of the chair, Rollie had put a blue plastic crate loaded to capacity with a huge nineteen inch CRT computer monitor that looked like it weighed a ton - not only would it stop Rebecca from escaping, it would stop anyone from sneaking in without the people inside knowing about it.

Gulping down a rising tide of bile, Rebecca tried to give the monitor a little push just to see how much force she'd need to shift it, but as she had feared, it was so heavy there was no way she could do it without help.

Realizing that all the strenuous work had been for naught, she became so dizzy that she couldn't keep her balance. Stumbling back, she put out her hand to try to reach the doorframe, but she missed it by ten inches. Instead, she fell forward, moaning loudly when she landed with a hard thud on the living room floor.

The bang stirred her three captors from their slumber, and they jumped up from the couch, yelling and shouting over each other, all thinking that they were under attack.

The exhaustion and the terrible disappointment finally caught up with Rebecca and she spiraled down a black, bottomless chasm, mercifully unaware of the obscenities Rollie was screaming at her.

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The first thing Joey did when she set foot on the bridge of the Argo was to light a cigar. Puffing away on the stogie, she quickly left the bridge and jumped down the stairs to get to her cabin.

"Why won't anyone explain to me what we're doing?" Lana said as she hurried after the Skipper, clearly only a few steps from the point where she'd start tearing her hair out.

"I'll show you in a few seconds," Joey said and pulled aside the curtain with the small 'Kaptin's Kwarters' patch. She wasted no time in getting down on the floor and reaching in under her bunk.
As Lana saw the unmade state of the bunk and the room in general - and sniffed the musky scent that still lingered in the air - she could hardly believe that it had only been a few hours since she and Joey had made wild, uninhibited love on the bunk. Shaking her head slowly, she began to consider if she was at the heart of all the problems that had happened to them.

"Here," Joey said and pulled out a padlocked Navy gray metal footlocker. Leaning back on her thighs, she sighed deeply and cast a dark glance at Olly who had entered the cabin and was leaning against the door post.

Just as Lana opened her mouth to ask yet again about the importance of the footlocker, Joey put her cigar in an ashtray on the table, found a small key and stuck it into the padlock. After working the lock, she flipped the lid open.

Lana's mouth instantly slammed shut when she realized that the footlocker held a small arsenal - two pistols, two automatic rifles and plenty of ammunition for both. "Oh, God…" she croaked, not quite believing her eyes.

Sighing again, Joey took one of the automatic rifles - a Colt AR15 - and worked the action to see if the oil was still fresh. "How long is it since we've used 'em, Olly?"

"Ten months next week," the mechanic answered darkly. "A couple of goons thinking they were pirates," she continued when she noticed Lana's gobsmacked expression.

"You didn't kill them… did you?" Lana croaked.

After taking the ammunition, all four firearms and two small items and placing them on the bunk, Joey slammed the footlocker's lid shut and shoved it back under the bunk. "No. We only fired warning shots in the air… but it was enough," she said and took her cigar.

"Oh… thank God," Lana mumbled under her breath.

Moving over to the bed, Olly picked up one of the Beretta M9 pistols and pulled back the slider to look at the internals. "If anything has happened to Rebecca… if they've beaten her… if they've ra-" - pausing, Olly began to grind her jaw - "If they've done anything to her, I can't guarantee I won't shoot to kill if it comes to a fight."

Joey just grunted, but Lana clutched her head and moved into the center of the cabin, staring wide-eyed at the two sailors. "Olly! We're all regular, law-abiding citizens here… we can't go in there guns-a-blazin' like we were in some kind of second-rate action movie! It'll only get even more people hurt! Look, Rebecca is my friend, too, but-"

"Friend? Oh, let me tell you something… Rebecca is more than just a friend. Much more. If you don't wanna do what's necessary, I suggest you stay here while the Skip and me go rescue the woman I love," Olly said strongly, tapping Lana on the chest with one of the fully loaded magazines.

Looking at the increasingly awkward scene - and remembering who was actually paying for the whole trip - Joey got up and took one of the AR15s. "Olly, cool down. Lana is only speaking her mind."

"Yeah? Well, so am I," Olly said, spun around and left the small cabin, leaving a gobsmacked Lana in her wake.

Sighing, Joey sat down on the bunk and began to unravel one of the small items she had taken from the footlocker - a carrier strap for the automatic rifle. After knocking off some ash in the ashtray, she quickly attached the plastic clips to two small metal eyes at either end of the rifle and tugged at it to see if it would hold.

"Joey…" Lana said imploringly as she sat down next to the Skipper. "Please listen to me… this is police business. Can't you understand that? If we go in with these things, Rollie might start shooting. I know you're a tough girl, but you're not invulnerable. You can't stop bullets, Joey. Neither can any of us, for that matter. I love Rebecca as a
friend, but I don't want to die tonight… or spend the rest of my life needing constant medical attention because I have a bullet lodged in my spine," Lana said, wringing her hands.

When she could see that her words didn't have much impact on Joey, she leaned in and placed a warm hand on the Skipper's cheek. "And I don't feel like going to any funerals any time soon, either," she added quietly, running her thumb across Joey's prominent cheekbone.

After a little while, Joey offered Lana a half-shrug and took her cigar from the ashtray. "I hope we can contain it… I don't want to see anyone get shot, you know. But you were there at the cops… you heard Warren. All he and the law can do is to wait for forty-eight hours. Or a little less now… whatever."

"Yes, but…"

"Lana, do you honestly believe that Rollie and the others will leave Rebecca unhurt for forty-eight hours when they discover they've reached the end of the line? When they learn they can't get a ransom for her? If they keep her on neutral ground somewhere, they may just leave her to die once they lose interest… but if they have her in Rollie's apartment… well. They'll be forced into doing something."

Scrunching up her face, Lana moved her suddenly trembling hand down to Joey's shoulder and held it in a vise-like grip. "W- wait a minute… b- but… are you saying Rebecca might not be in Rollie's apartment…? B- but I thought…"

"We don't know yet, Lana. I hope she is. That's why we need the hardware," Joey said and tapped her index finger on one of the rifles.

"Oh, God, I… I thought we'd just have to go there and free her… now you're saying we may have to search the entire city for her? Oh God, I've been so damn naïve..." Lana said and buried her face in her hands. After a few seconds, she was overcome by the fatigue and began to sob quietly.

Sighing, Joey pushed away the firearms and pulled Lana into a soothing hug. As she whispered quiet words of nonsense into the sobbing blonde's hair, she realized that Cupid's Arrows had hit her, too, if not with quite as much strength as Olly.

Joey looked at the blonde in her arms and felt a very strong need to protect her from harm, but knew at the same time that she had to respect that Lana wasn't a frail little flower who needed to be wrapped in cotton - she was only a bit inexperienced with the darker sides of life. "Lana," Joey whispered, pulling back and caressing Lana's cheek. "I think you should stay here. Take a sleeping pill or something and try to get some rest. I promise that Olly and I will take care. And that we'll get Rebecca back in one piece."

"No, I… I need to come with you, Joey. If I stayed behind, I'd work myself into such a state that I wouldn't even be able to breathe. Oh, I'm sorry for crying like a little girl..." Lana said and wiped her red eyes. "...I'm just so damn tired… and worried."

"We all are. All right. I suggest that you go into the shower and put a cold wash cloth on your eyes. It'll help. We'll be going in five minutes… I just need to talk Olly down from the murderous high she's on right now," Joey said and took out her cigar, clearly intent on kissing Lana.

At the last moment, Lana turned her face away and let out a choked-up chuckle. "No… I'm such a mess… I have stuff all over my face…"

"I love your stuff," Joey whispered and claimed Lana's lips in a warm, loving kiss.

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Fifteen minutes later, Joey, Olly and Lana took full advantage of the darkness and the many shadows by running undetected up to stand in front of a four-story building across the street from Rollie's apartment at 119 Chilton Street.

Quickly checking her wristwatch, Lana had problems getting to grips with the outrageous situation that she found herself in - she was about to raid an apartment with two heavily armed neo-Amazons to save a kidnapped friend. 'And all that at five to two in the frickin' morning!' she thought, shaking her head in disbelief.

"It's up there," Joey said quietly, pointing at a window on the third floor where two of the four panes were cracked. There was only a faint light on in the apartment, but it was enough for the three raiders to see shadows occasionally flickering past the window.

Olly took the powerful binoculars they used on the Argo and zoomed in on the window, but even the strong lenses couldn't quite penetrate the darkness. "Mmmm. Can't see anything," she said and lowered them again.

"I guess we'll just have to jump out into the big blue. Olly... I'll do the talking," Joey said and swung her rifle down from her shoulder.

At the sight, Lana broke out into a wild shiver that was only worsened when she heard Joey work the action, producing the familiar metallic sound. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she let out a short stab of air that sounded even more desperate than how she actually felt.

"Are you all right, Lana?" Joey said, putting a calming hand on the blonde's elbow.

"Yes. Let's get it over with. I hope my heart still works afterwards..." Lana croaked, giving Joey's hand a little squeeze.

Olly worked the action of her rifle as well and flashed a steely grin that gave her a look of an avenging angel out to even the score. "Let's go," she said hoarsely. Hunching over, she quickly left the shadows and ran across the street, headed for the building's entrance.

Gulping loudly, Lana clenched her fists and followed the mechanic into the unknown.

Joey kept standing at the other side of the street, taking a deep puff on her stogie that had been reduced to an inch-long stump. Once she had gained all she could from the remains, she threw it onto the street and crushed the butt with her heel. Quickly glancing up and down the deserted street, she hunched over and ran away from the shadows to join her friends at the door.

"How do we get in? Please don't tell me you're gonna break it down...!" Lana whispered once they had assembled at an old, decrepit metal door that was equipped with a frosted glass pane that had been completely covered by stickers and graffiti.

Joey's only reply was to put a finger across her lips. Moving forward, the Skipper turned the metal door handle, feeling it twist in her strong hand. With a click, the door opened. Turning back to Lana, Joey wiggled her eyebrows, sending a silent message that sometimes, the easy way out was the best.

The three women quickly filed into the stairwell, looking up from the lowest landing. The air was warm and stale, and held a faint whiff of beer, sweat, onion soup and something else Lana didn't want to think about.

Pulling Lana close, Joey leaned in very close to her ear. "I have the point, Olly is next, you go last," she said so quietly that the words were nearly swallowed by their clothing.
"Works for me," Lana replied quietly. "Of course, I don't know what having the point means, but…"

Lana's question was answered when Joey wrapped the strap for the rifle around her arm and began to sneak up the wooden staircase, taking great care in avoiding the worst squeaks.

A few moments later, Olly followed the Skipper upwards, leaving Lana all alone at the lowest landing. Breaking out into a shiver, Lana waited for Olly to clear the first ten steps before hurriedly following in her path.

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Reaching the correct door, Joey knelt down and held her rifle ready. When Olly came up to her, she pointed at the mechanic and then at the door, silently asking Olly to put her ear to the door.

Behind them, Lana ducked down to stay out of sight in case the door was opened before they were ready.

Olly nodded at Joey's request and moved over to the door. Placing her ear on a pane of glass, she thought she could hear a female voice and at least one male voice, but the words were too muffled for her to understand what was said, even if she strained her hearing.

Suddenly the main entrance to the street was opened, prompting Olly to spin around and cover the staircase with her rifle, and Lana to bury her face in her hands and bite down on her lips to throttle the squeak she had almost let out.

Once the front door had closed, somebody began to shuffle up the stairs, seemingly taking it fairly slowly. A brief while later, a key was put into the lock of one of the doors on the second floor. After working the lock, the mystery person opened the door, went inside, closed the door and let the sliding lock fall into place, restoring a perfect stillness to the dark stairwell.

Coming up for air, Lana felt something tickling the corner of her mouth. Moving her hands down from her eyes, she touched her lips and found a small smear of blood, the indirect result of someone coming home at two in the morning. 'Oh… damn. On the other hand, I guess it's better than soiling my undies,' she thought and reached into her pocket to find a small handkerchief.

With the immediate crisis over, Olly went back to the door to listen again. This time, she was sure she could hear the female voice speaking in agitated tones, but she still couldn't discern any identifiable words. Grunting, she moved over to Joey and leaned down.

"Skip, I can hear a woman in there, but I don't know if it's Rebecca. It could be… anyway, the first time I listened, I could hear two men, but not the second time," Olly whispered.

"All right."

Suddenly narrowing her eyes, Olly nodded in a determined fashion, almost like she had just come up with the perfect solution. "I have an idea. Follow my lead."

"Okay. Lana?" Joey whispered, looking over her shoulder.

"Okay!" Lana croaked in a squeaky voice.

Nodding again, Olly quickly ran down the stairs to stand at the lowest landing. "Either this is gonna be the best plan ever… or the worst," she mumbled to herself as she briefly opened the front door before slamming it shut again with a bang that shook the entire stairwell.
Once the echo from the bang had died down, she leaned her head back and began to sing her favorite bawdy song at the top of her lungs in the most drunken, slurred voice she could muster.

'As I was a-walkin' down Paradise Street, Lord what did I see?

A pretty young damsel I chanced for to meet

She was round in the corner and bluff in the lay

But I set all sails and cried "oh what the hey"

I threw out my hawser and took her in tow

And yardarm to yardarm away did we go…'

Timing her words perfectly, she sang the raunchy tune all the way up from the front door past the first and the second floors until she reached Joey and Lana who were both staring at her in wide-eyed confusion.

'It was up in her quarters she piped me aboard

And there on her bed I cut loose with my sword

But just as me tonguey was forging ahead

She shouted "My wife!" and jumped out of bed…'

Humming the next lines, Olly grabbed her rifle and turned it around, holding the butt ready to use as a improvised door knocker. "Hey! Hey, baby! Are you schlipping?" she said loudly in a slurred voice, banging on the door with the rifle. "It'sch not fair… I only kisched her onsch… and sche aschked me ta do it, baby! Oh, baby, can you hear me? Pleasche come to the door if you can hear me! I 'come to aopolische!" - hiccup - "And to schare a bottle of brandy wisch youuuut!"

A scraping noise from the other side of the door made Olly tighten all her muscles and get ready to jump into action. Behind her, she sensed Joey moving further to the right to get a clear line of fire.

"Oh, baby! I'm scho schoorry!" Olly said again, crouching down slightly and holding the rifle in a two-handed grip.

'Will you shut the fuck up!? a male voice shouted from inside the apartment. 'You're at the wrong apartment, you drunken moron! Fuck the hell off before we come out and kick your ass!'

When the person didn't seem to want to open the door, Olly stepped forward and once again slammed the rifle against the wooden filling. "Oy! A man! You got a man in there, baby? Oh, that'sch juscht too schcary, baby! What can a man give you that I can't?"

That did the trick.
When the door opened with a groaning creak, a scraggily white man appeared in the doorway, intent on showing the drunken woman outside just what a man could give - unfortunately, he never made it further than the doorstep.

Recognizing him at once as one of the men who had attacked her, Olly thrust the butt of the rifle ahead, ramming it into the young man's face with tremendous force. As he crumbled to the floor, she jumped over him and tore into the apartment, turning the rifle around as she did so.

Behind Olly, Joey jumped up and hurriedly followed her friend inside to provide cover.

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_Two minutes earlier._

The split second Rebecca heard the door bang in the stairwell, she knew something was about to happen. When the drunken voice began to sing the raunchy song Olly had introduced her to at the picnic on Hook Island, she felt her heart rate increase dramatically.

Not wanting to show her excitement, she tried to keep everything inside, including sitting completely still in the chair Rollie had duct-taped her to after she had tried to escape. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head forward and began to mouth a silent prayer that her ordeal would soon be over.

When Rollie heard the song, he got up from the table he'd been sitting on and went over to the window. Wound up tighter than a spring, he wiped his sweaty forehead several times with a hand that trembled slightly from lack of a sleep and an abundance of raw nerves. Even though he couldn't see anything down on the street, he grew more and more agitated by the second.

As the drunken person began to pound on the door and yell inane comments, Rollie let out a roar and went over the couch where Anton and Tyrone were sitting, still busy slumbering. Kicking Anton's leg, he pulled his scraggily fellow hoodlum upright. "Anton, make that crazy, drunken bitch stop! She's getting on my nerves!" Rollie hissed through clenched teeth.

"Man, let go… oh… Dude! You said my name!" Anton said, slapping his forehead.

"What the fuck does it matter now! Make her stop!" Rollie said and gave Anton such a shove on the back that he stumbled into the small hallway.

Grimacing, he showed Rollie the middle finger before moving the computer monitor that barricaded the door.

"Will you shut the fuck up!?!" Anton bellowed. "You're at the wrong apartment, you drunken moron! Fuck the hell off before we come out and kick your ass!"

'Oy! A man! You got a man in there, baby? Oh, that'sch juscht too schcary, baby! What can a man give you that I can't?'

"What kind of crap is that?" Anton mumbled and opened the door.

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Five seconds later, Rebecca let out a strangled cry of joy as Olly thundered into the living room holding a large, dark gray rifle. "Oh, God! Dominique! Dominique! You're all right!" Rebecca howled in a voice thick with emotion.
Standing behind Rebecca, Rollie became completely calm when he realized that the game was up. Instead of relying on the dimwitted Tyrone to come to his assistance, he reached behind him to pull out a six-inch knife he wore in a leather sheath stuck to his belt.

"Drop that knife, dirtbag!" Olly bellowed, threatening Rollie with the rifle. Behind her, Joey filed into the apartment to cover Tyrone, but the large man didn't show any signs of wanting to join the party.

Hearing that Rollie had a knife, Rebecca cried out and began to rock left and right on the chair to make herself a more difficult target for the hoodlum, but it didn't help - a heartbeat later, he grabbed her from behind and wrapped a strong arm around her neck.

"You're not gonna fire that gun, bitch. Are ya?" Rollie said, moving the tip of the knife precariously close to Rebecca's right cheek and eye. "'Cos if you do, my hand might slip and carve up this little piggy."

"Just try, asshole. Just try," Olly growled back to keep up her menacing appearance - but in her heart, she knew he was right. Unless she killed him in cold blood with the first shot, he would have enough time to harm Rebecca.

Laughing coldly, Rollie nodded at Joey's and Olly's rifles. "I knew you didn't have the balls to shoot. Why don't you two bitches put those things down so we can see who's the strongest the old-fashioned way?" Rollie said and twirled the knife in his hand.

"That's not a bad idea, Olly," Joey said and unwrapped the rifle's strap from her arm. "After all… there's no point in wasting ammo on maggots, is there?"

Olly chuckled darkly and followed Joey's example. "Oh, that's so right on so many levels, Skip," she said in a voice dripping with menace.

Behind the two Amazons, Lana briefly peeked around the door post and winked at Rebecca who returned the gesture in kind.

Moving deceptively slowly, Olly put the rifle against the living room wall and began to glide forward, slithering across the floor like a King Cobra on the hunt.

Rollie narrowed his eyes, trying to look at both women at the same time. When he suddenly realized that he wouldn't be able to take them down, he let out a deafening roar and pulled his arm back, intent on skewering Rebecca.

As she jumped forward, Olly answered the roar with a war cry of her own that sounded even louder in the small room. Grabbing Rollie's arm before it could reach Rebecca, she forced it backwards and twisted his wrist, leaving him no option but to drop the knife.

At the same time, Tyrone decided to join the fun after all, but struggled to get up from the low couch. When he finally managed to get upright, he was only able to maintain that position for three seconds before Joey had planted her foot in his gut.

Belching loudly, Tyrone clutched his considerable gut and staggered backwards, eventually tripping over the couch and landing on the floor with a thud that made the window panes rattle.

Lana took that as her cue and zipped in through the door. At once, she knelt down in front of Rebecca and began to tear like mad at the duct tape bindings. "I can't... get it... to... oh, dammit...! I need a knife of some kind...! Joey? Skip?" she said, leaning back on her thighs. "Could you... oh... thank you," she continued as Joey quickly kicked Rollie's knife over to her.
In the meantime, Olly and Rollie were wrestling back and forth in the small apartment, frequently stumbling over the sparse furniture and making such a racket that it was hard to hear anything other than the fight. Both fighters were groaning and grunting as they grappled with each other, trying to find the first opening in the other's defenses.

Behind Joey, Tyrone staggered to his feet, still clutching his aching gut.

"You want more, chump?" Joey said, clenching her fists.

Tyrone just shook his head and let out a new belch that sent a little dribble of saliva down his chin. Groaning, he turned around and dropped down on the couch, once again putting his hands in the air.

Grimacing in disgust, Joey concentrated on helping Lana cut through the duct tape holding Rebecca in place.

Predictably, Rollie began to fight dirty when he found himself unable to defeat the raging mechanic in a fair fight. As he was forced up against the table, he reached behind him, grabbed one of the empty beer cans and threw it at Olly, hitting her across the brow.

Even though the impact wasn't as hard as it would have been had it been a full can, it still gave Olly's already sore head quite a jolt, and she let go of Rollie's wifebeater to rub her brow.

Rollie took full advantage of that by firing off a right hook to her jaw that whipped her head around and forced her backwards. With his opponent in trouble, Rollie went on the offensive, throwing a barrage of kicks and punches at the mechanic.

Olly was able to deflect most of them, but she felt increasingly dizzy and her head began to throb mercilessly. Feeling herself pushed up against the wall by Rollie, she had to endure his beer-laced breath as he shoved his head in her face.

"You're fuckin' weak just like I expected ya to be!" he barked, grinning an ugly, gloating smile directly into her face.

Behind the two fighters, Joey tensed up again, ready to come to her friend's rescue, but a closer look at Olly's eyes revealed that she was in less trouble than it appeared.

"Fella… you stink. Don't ya ever brush ya teeth?" Olly said and rammed her knee upwards, feeling her kneecap score a perfect hit on the thug's privates.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!" Rollie howled, staggering backwards. Once the excruciating pain reached his brain, he doubled over and pressed his hands against his crotch.

Over on the couch, Tyrone let out a similar whine and crossed his legs in sympathy.

Pushing herself off the wall, Olly moved forward, stalking the howling Rollie. "Not so tough now, are ya? What's the matter? Does it sting? That's what happens to guys who don't wash their ugly little shrimp every day."

Suddenly jumping forward, Olly fired off a right hook to Rollie's chin as a payback for the one he had given her earlier; the impact made a cracking sound that filled the small apartment, and sent him flying onto his butt.

Sawing away at the duct tape, Lana had already freed both Rebecca's arms and was working hard at releasing her legs, too. "Almost… there… almost… there… hey! One more limb on the loose!" she said in an overly cheery voice as she went over to the right leg.
Rebecca just let out a very tired chuckle, trying to push away all thoughts of the one thing she needed more than anything else - even more than pressing her lips against Olly's. "Uh, Lana…?"

"I'm almost there," Lana said, sawing furiously at the duct tape. When the last thread of the brown tape was cut in two, she let out a whoop and quickly got to her feet. "Oh, Rebecca!" she howled, pulling her friend upright and giving her a crushing, swinging hug.

"Uh, Lana…! I really, really need to go to the bathroom," Rebecca said, grimacing and squeezing her aching thighs together.

"Oh… of course. Come on, I think it's right out here in the hallway," Lana said and helped Rebecca walk away from the chair.

Walking very stiffly, Rebecca turned right into the hallway, found the door to the bathroom and hurried inside.

A few seconds later, the easily recognizable sound of splashing water made Lana grin goofily and break out into a blush.

Olly took a deep breath to cool down, panting hard from the exertion. Rollie was lying at her feet, rolled up into a ball - much like his cousin Keyshada had done - nursing his aching member. Snorting, Olly put her foot on his shoulder and pushed him over onto his back. "You pathetic little runt," she growled. "What the hell did you hope to accomplish with this crazy deal?"

When Rollie's only reply was a blob of spit flying through the air, Olly grunted and began to walk away from him.

Taking the rifles, Joey swung her own over her shoulder and handed the other one to Olly, but the mechanic just shook her head.

"All right. Hey, Lana… I don't suppose you want this?" Joey said to Lana who quickly shook her head even harder. "Hmmm," the Skipper continued, swinging the second rifle over her other shoulder.

Once Rebecca returned from the bathroom, Olly took her hands and held them tight. For several seconds, the two lovers were content to just look at each other, but the need to connect soon won out, and Olly leaned in to claim Rebecca's lips in a tender, loving kiss.

"Let's go home," Olly whispered before kissing Rebecca again.

"Hear, hear," Joey said, putting her hand on the small of Lana's back.

Lana didn't need to be told twice, and she hurriedly scooted out of the apartment, shielding her eyes from the hideous sight of the scraggly, white hoodlum lying on the floor of the hall, bleeding from his broken nose.

While Olly helped Rebecca out of the apartment and down the stairs, Joey went back inside and crouched down in front of Rollie. "This time, everybody gets to walk away, chump. The next time, *you* won't be so lucky," she said, pointing a finger in his face.

Growling, Rollie turned around on the floor and shot Tyrone a fiery look. "Take her down, ya stupid fuck!"

Tyrone just shook his head. "No way, bro. My stomach is still hurting where she kicked me. I'm done."

To the sound of Rollie letting out an impressive stream of cusswords aimed at his fellow hoodlum, Joey walked out of the ruined apartment and quickly ran down the stairs to catch up with her friends.
On their way down to the Argo, Joey thought of something she needed to do and reached into her pocket to find her cell phone. Flipping it open, she quickly dialed the number for the police station and waited for Officer Parker to pick it up.

'Charlotte Amalie Police Precinct, you're speaking to Officer Warren Parker. How may I help you?' Parker said at the other end of the connection.

"Hi, it's Joey Swain. We were by earlier thinking that our friend had been kidnapped…?" Joey said in a sing-song voice.

'Yes, Miss Swain… go on.'

"Well, our friend is back with us now. I just wanted to tell you that you were right. Turns out she really did have a little holiday fling," Joey continued, looking at Olly who had her arms wrapped around Rebecca's shoulders, supporting her as they descended the steep street.

'I thought as much. Happens a lot with the tourists. They see our strapping young lads and can't keep their hands to themselves,' Officer Parker said in a somber voice.

"Ah… yes. Something like that. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know."

"Thank you, Miss Swain. Oh, by the way… you wouldn't happen to know anything about a domestic disturbance call I've just received from 119 Chilton Street, would you?"

"A domestic disturbance call? Why, Officer Parker, what makes you think that I would?" Joey said, rolling her eyes.

Hearing that, Lana immediately looked at the two rifles slung over Joey's shoulders - a split second later, she frantically whipped her head around to look for the police officers that she was sure were hiding in the shadows, ready to apprehend them and send them up the river for life.

'Oh, no particular reason. It's just that several of the residents claim that a handful of women raided an apartment owned by a known felon.'

"Well, it certainly wasn't me, Officer. I'm shocked that you'd even think so!"

'Mmmm. Yes. Thank you for letting me know about your friend, Miss Swain. Talk to you later. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Officer Parker," Joey said and terminated the connection. "Talk to you later… pah."

Still feeling nervous, Lana scooted up alongside Joey and hooked her arm inside the tall Skipper's. "Are we going to jail, Joey?" she squeaked in a tiny voice.

"Nope. We're going home to the Argo."

"Oh… I need to borrow a few clothes… all my stuff is still in my travel bag in my suite. Damn… with all the crooks working at that hotel, I really hope my things haven't been stolen," Lana said, scrunching up her face.

"Nah, I doubt they'd dare. But hey, I can promise you one thing, Lana… and that goes for you, too, Rebecca… there's gonna be plenty of pampering tonight, that's for sure," Joey said and mussed Lana's blonde mane.
"Yeah? I'm a fan of getting pampered, Rebecca?"

"Suits me fine," Rebecca said in a croaky voice. "I'm not getting out of bed for the next sixteen hours... and I demand that a certain someone keeps me company for every single minute..."

"And that suits *me* just fine, baby! I'll be glued to your skin for as long as you want me," Olly said and leaned down to place a kiss on the side of Rebecca's head.

"Well... that'll be forever, Dominique," Rebecca said quietly, pulling the mechanic even closer.

Behind the two lovebirds, Lana felt all the tension and the fear that had amassed inside her for the last few hours bubble up to the surface and disappear into the dark night, and she couldn't stop an emotional, choked-up "Awwwwww!" from escaping her lips.

Chuckling, Joey pulled the sniffing Lana into a half-hug, intent on dishing out so much love when they got back to the Argo that they'd both go under in an ocean of bliss.

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CHAPTER 12 - EPILOGUE

Friday at noon.

Leaning back on the bench on the rear deck of the Argo, Rebecca studied Olly's perfectly sculpted figure as the mechanic worked on adjusting the Diver Down flag that was hanging on the small pole. Through much debate and a little bribery, she had managed to convince Olly to wear shorts and a tank top instead of the hideous boiler suit when she wasn't working on her beloved engines.

The only problem with that was that Olly's well-toned legs and arms - not to mention her voluptuous chest - were almost too much for Rebecca to cope with, and she couldn't tear her eyes away from the dark-skinned mechanic who was creating quite a spectacle against the deep blue sky.

When Olly felt her lover's eyes on her, she turned around and put her arms behind her head. "Phew, it's damn hot today, huh?" she said, making sure that the muscles in her arms flexed while she fluffed her hair back.

"Uh-huh," Rebecca echoed, looking fairly hot under the collar as well even though she was thoroughly protected by a wide-brimmed floppy hat and a gallon of suntan lotion.

"Have you finished registering our loot yet?" Olly said, pointing at the rear deck of the Argo where nine gold artifacts had been lined up in a perfect row.

"Uh-huh... I mean, uh, yes... almost," Rebecca said, blushing slightly for zoning out in the middle of the day. "Seven down, two to go," she continued, scribbling down a description of the artifacts Joey and Lana had found at the bottom of the sea - three dinner plates, four cups, a larger bowl and something that looked like a brooch where the centerpiece was missing.

A loud splash behind the Argo heralded the arrival of Lana who held another dinner plate in her hand. After putting it on the rear deck, she swooped herself up and pushed her mouthpiece aside. "Look, Rebecca, we found another one. The Skipper is doing the final sweep now, but I think we've cleared this area."
"Just put it next to the other plates… I'm almost done cataloguing them," Rebecca said, briefly looking up from her paperwork.

"Okay," Lana said and reached down to take off her swim fins.

Once Olly had tied a knot on the flag pole, she dusted off her hands and walked down to the rear deck. "Hey, Lana, do you want me to take off the tanks?"

Unclicking the plastic lock around her waist, Lana began to pull the shoulder straps down to ease the removal of the backpack. "Yes, please, Olly."

"Comin' right up," Olly said and knelt down behind Lana. She quickly pulled the straps fully down and took the rig with the twin tanks. "Okay, you're all done."

"Thanks, Olly. The rig with the small tanks was the, uh… second best thing that happened on this trip," Lana said with a wink that Olly replied to with a cheesy grin.

Putting away the papers, Rebecca took the last plate and studied it closely. "See any fish down there, Lana?" she said, sticking out her tongue.

"Plenty. You know, I think I want to buy an underwater camera. It's such a colorful, fantastic world down there."

"Mmmm. Dangerous, too," Rebecca said, picking at a loose thread on her bandaged arm.

Getting up, Lana put down the swim fins on the deck and padded over to sit next to her friend. "Yeah. I'm sorry you couldn't come down with us this time, Rebecca. Have you thought about tomorrow?"

"Yes," Rebecca said with a sly smile. "I'm staying," she continued, exchanging sizzling hot looks with Olly who was about to go below to swap the tanks.

"I thought you might," Lana said and pulled her friend into a hug.

"And when will you decide? Come on, Lana… everyone and their seeing-eye dog know that you and the Skipper have got it just as bad as me and Dominique. Maybe a little differently because you're younger, but it's so obvious."

"Well, I'm… I'm still working on what to say to my father," Lana said with a shrug.

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

"No. Thanks for the offer, Rebecca, but no. It's my responsibility. Oh, I can do it… I'm a big girl. I just need to find a good angle for it… or hook. Find an analogy he'll understand and take it from there. That's all."

"Mmmm. Go get showered, Lana. You don't want to have an infection on your last day, do you?"

Laughing out loud, Lana slapped her wet hands together and got up from the bench. "You have a point, Miss Stern. The little thing I have planned for tonight wouldn't work at all with an infection."

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Ten minutes later, a freshly showered Lana came back to the rear deck just in time to see Joey break the surface. Thinking that the Skipper looked like a water goddess in her new, formfitting red-and-blue wetsuit, she had to lick her lips at the thought of what would happen when she and Joey would execute her plans for the evening.
Joey effortlessly moved herself up on the rear deck and took off her swim fins. After removing the mouthpiece and the goggles, she pulled the air tank off and placed it next to her.

"Hi again, Skip. D'ya find anything on the last sweep?" Lana said and pushed aside Joey's equipment so it wouldn't fall out of the boat.

"No. I think we got it all here. Nothing down there but tropical fish, manta rays and seaweed," Joey said and got to her feet. "Hey, c'mere…"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't it time for a kiss?" Joey said and pulled Lana very close.

"I think it could be, yes," Lana said and stood up on tip-toes to give the Skipper a little kiss that tasted of salt water.

Once they separated, Joey became very interested in Lana's hair. Reaching into the golden mane just above Lana's left ear, Joey began to tickle the scalp. "There's something there…"

"What? In my hair? Oh, God, it's not a spider, is it?" Lana said and frantically brushed her hand through her hair.

"No. Oh, look at that… where did that come from?" Joey said and held up a large, gold hairclip that had seemingly come straight out of Lana's skull.

Over the next two seconds, Lana's expression went from worried to shocked to sublimely ticked off, and she promptly reached out and slapped Joey's gut. "Oh… Ha. Ha. Ha. I'll bet you've spent the entire dive planning that one!"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Joey said, handing the hairclip to Lana. "The proper gift for a proper lady."

"Oh… now you're gonna make me cry again," Lana said and took the clip. Studying it closely, she tried to hold it to her hair, but discovered that it needed a much larger mane to work.

"Back then, women had longer, thicker hair than we do. Corkscrews and stuff. You know," Joey said and brushed a few strands of Lana's blonde hair away from her ear.

"Thank you, Joey. It's wonderful," Lana said and kissed the Skipper again.

"You're welcome."

'Skip! We've got company!' Rebecca suddenly shouted from the pantry where she and Olly were preparing lunch.

"Company? Out here?" Joey said and went over to the starboard railing to see for herself. She quickly spotted a medium-sized pleasure craft three hundred yards away from them that was approaching fast.

Grunting, Joey shielded her eyes to see the name of the boat. When her suspicions were confirmed, she grunted again and pulled Lana into a hug. "It's the Ginny Tonic… Larry Pickett, that son of a bitch! And here we were, all worried about him…"

"Oh, yes… the POW-POW, right?"

"PAN-PAN, Lana."
"Uh, okay."

"But yes."

Half a minute later, the pleasure craft pulled alongside the Argo, coming to a stop just before the buffers would have touched. Taking off his white cap, Lawrence Pickett waved his arm in the air. "Ahoy, Argo! Are you in trouble?" he said in his typically condescending voice.

"No, we're not, Larry. Where the hell have you been? You had the harbor master send out a PAN-PAN Overdue Vessel alert!" Joey said, gripping the top of the railing.

"Yeah, I heard. Ah, he'll come around. The gale wasn't really that bad. When I noticed it, I just headed further south instead and dropped my passengers off on an island so they wouldn't puke all over my yacht. No problem."

"Well, it was for the rest of us, Larry. Have you been back to Charlotte Amalie since then?"

"Uh... no?"

"I think Everett is kinda pissed off at you. Last I heard, he was talking about renegotiating your mooring contract," Joey said smugly.

"Oh... uh... okay. Uh, I better..." Lawrence Pickett said and turned the wheel to port to get away from the Argo.

"Have a safe passage back home!" Joey said, waving at her arch-opponent, but he didn't have time to answer.

"Joey Swain, that was mean!" Lana said, poking the Skipper in the side. "We haven't spoken to the harbor master since he came down to tell us about Olly and Rebecca!"

Turning around, Joey flashed Lana a cheeky grin that left no doubt that she hadn't been entirely truthful. "Ohhhh... really? Huh. I wonder who it was I spoke to, then...? Ah, I'm getting old. I can't remember anymore. Why don't you head below and eat lunch? I'll shower and join you in a little while," she said, pulling Lana into a hug.

"Oof...! You scoundrel!" Lana said, laughing into Joey's snug wetsuit.

A few hours later.

Once the Argo had set course for home with Olly's fine-tuned engines purring merrily, Lana took the satellite phone and one of the deck chairs and moved up to the forward deck.

Unfolding the chair, she sat down and stared at the phone in her hand. Deciding that calling her father could wait a little while, she snuggled down in her lifejacket and looked out over the eternal ocean, soon feeling tears sting her eyes for the umpteenth time that week.

Feeling the powerful purr of the engines under her rear end, looking at the gentle waves and tasting the salty residue on her lips brought on by the warm breeze, she realized that, for very nearly the first time in her life, she was where she wanted to be, doing what she wanted to do - and best of all, she was sharing her little paradise with three women who had become very important to her.

Dominique Hofstaedter, the good-natured, jovial mechanic with a heart of gold and a backbone of steel; Rebecca Stern, the passing acquaintance who had become a dear friend and who had blossomed so much in a short week that
she had almost turned into a brand new woman; and finally Josephine Swain. Often hard to read, never hard to love, Joey represented everything Lana had been looking for her entire adult life without even knowing it - until she found it.

Just thinking about the tough and badass, yet soft and tender Skipper sent a warm shiver through Lana's body that made her feel even more wonderful.

At that exact moment, the Argo rounded the outer buoys marking the entrance to the harbor, and Lana felt the engines slow down to a burble. It was too early in the day for the lights to be on in the houses, but it was still a magical sight, and a broad, genuine smile soon spread out over her expressive face.

Nodding to herself, she picked up the satellite phone, turned it on and punched in the number for her father's office.

'The office of Alfred Ferguson,' Mrs. Coogan said at the other end of the line.

"Hello, Mrs. Coogan, it's Lana Ferguson. Is my father in?"

'Yes, Miss Ferguson. Please hold.'

A few electronic clicks followed, lasting exactly long enough for Lana to move the phone away from her ear to see if something had gone wrong.

'Alfred Ferguson speaking. Hi, darling! How are you?'

"Hi, Daddy! Oh, I'm fine, thank you. Uh, listen…"

'How come you didn't call my cell directly?'

"I'm on a satellite phone. Daddy, I-

'How is Miss Stern today? I hope she doesn't have any lasting effects from her terrible ordeal? Shrinks are so expensive these days…'

"Oh, I'm not an expert, but she looks fine to me. Listen, Daddy… I've… uh, we've found more gold at the bottom of the sea," Lana said, squirming in her seat when she realized that she didn't have the guts to tell her father the things she had intended.

'Oh, really? Congratulations. I'm quite proud of you, sweetheart. It seems that you've inherited my knack for finding lucrative businesses,' Alfred Ferguson said with a laugh.

"Yes, but… Daddy, there's something."

'How much have you found now?'

"Uh… quite a lot, actually. Twelve items, including a very pretty hairclip that Jo… I mean, the Skipper found for me today."

'That's nice, Lana. I'm sorry to be so brief, but I-

Feeling the opportunity slip through her fingers like grains of sand, Lana sat up straight on the deck chair and rubbed her brow. "Daddy, I need to say something. It's really important to me, and I know you won't like it, but I need to say it."
After a brief pause - and a stony, oppressive silence - Alfred came back on the line, speaking in a somber tone. 'Did one of the sailors make you pregnant?'

"What? No! That's not it... and besides, it would definitely be one for the record books... no, what I need to tell you is that I... I..." - feeling her throat constrict painfully, Lana grimaced wildly which contorted her pretty face into an ugly mask.

"I've met someone here. I'm going to stay. I... I'm not coming home tomorrow, Daddy," she heard herself say a thousand miles away from where the rest of her was.

This time, the stony silence lasted for so long that Lana could picture her father champing on the carpet in a fit of rage. Gulping, she tried to shake the satellite phone and squeak a very faint "H-hello...?"

'Sweetheart, I... oh... are you sure you have thought it through? I mean... it's such a drastic step,'

"I'm sure, yes," Lana said and looked down at her trembling hand. Suddenly wanting to cry, she sniffed a few times and leaned back in the deck chair, completely drained of energy.

'I've never been able to say no to you, darling, you know that, but... this time... I don't know what to say. I really don't.'

Suddenly getting a bright idea, one that couldn't fail to get her father to see why she had chosen the way she had, Lana bolted upright again and clutched the phone to her ear. "Daddy! How about coming down here? It's only a seven hour flight... if you take the company jet, you could be here mid-afternoon tomorrow!"

'What? Fly to St. Thomas? Do they even have an airport there? Well, of course they do... but...'

"Daddy, I want you to meet the w... uh... th-the reason why I can't come home now. Once you see what I saw, I'm sure you'll understand. Please say yes, Daddy," Lana said, feeling her head swimming worse than it ever had. Even as she spoke, she realized with startling clarity what she had just set in motion, and she hoped the whole deal wouldn't end in a fiery inferno.

'Well... I... all right, you've convinced me. I'll come down tomorrow. I'm not sure I can make it by mid-afternoon, though. I have a meeting with a potential client in the mansion at nine, but... uh...' - the sound of pages being flipped filtered through the connection - 'Could I be down there at seven p.m. Just in time for dinner at your hotel. How does that sound, darling?'

"The hotel... Uh, I'm not actually stay- uh, that sounds fine, Daddy. We can work out the details once you're here. Oh, I... I'm really looking forward to seeing you. I hope you'll be able to see things from my perspective. I know you'll have a lot of questions, but we'll answ... try to answer them. Okay?"

'Okay, sweetheart. I'm sorry to be so rude, but I really have to hang up now. Mrs. Coogan is quite literally tugging at my sleeve. I'm terribly late for an appointment at Rosemeyer & Stahl. Well, I won't bother you with the details. See you tomorrow. Love you, sweetheart.'

"Love you, too, Daddy," Lana said and closed the connection. Sighing, she collapsed like a leaking balloon and slumped bonelessly into the deck chair.

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As Joey applied the turning signal and drove into the parking lot at the Cyril E. King Airport at twenty to seven on Saturday evening, Lana began to chew on her fingernails, feeling very small as she sat on the front seat of the cream-colored six-seater Toyota Land Cruiser they had borrowed from Everett.

When that didn't really have any effect on her frayed nerves, she gripped the seat belt hard. When that didn't work either, she began to fidget with her sunglasses.

"Lana, will you calm down? You're fretting about like a fox in a henhouse," Olly said, sitting on the middle row of seats with her arm wrapped around Rebecca's waist.

"I am calm! I'm perfectly calm! If I were any calmer, I'd be in a casket!" Lana said through clenched teeth.

"Uh-huh? Okie-dokie," Olly said and went back to cuddling with Rebecca.

Turning into one of the aisles, Joey slowed down to find a spot. "Where do you want to park, Lana?"

"Ten thousand miles away from here..."

"Where would that be? New Zealand?" Joey said and put a calming hand on Lana's thigh. "Relax. Everything's going to be all right. I can feel it in my bones."

"God, I wish I had your confidence..." Lana said and buried her face in her hands.

Finally finding a spot within reasonable distance from the historical terminal building, Joey slid the Land Cruiser in between two other SUVs and turned off the engine. "So...?"

"So," Lana echoed, sighing deeply before opening the door and stepping out.

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Twenty minutes later, Lana had turned into a quivering ball of nerves and she was literally unable to stay in one place for more than a second at a time. Instead, she walked around in little circles, pretending to look at a scale model of the airport that was in a huge glass display case, but in reality not seeing anything at all.

Suddenly feeling that the peach T-shirt and the white Bermuda shorts she was wearing were far too common, she wished she had put on the yellow, Brazilian-style pant suit she had worn on her trip down - it was simply more expensive and more fitting to wear for the daughter of a rich merchant banker.

Sighing deeply, Lana began to chew on her fingernails on her left hand - the ones on her right had all been worn down to nothing at all - and resumed walking around in circles around the scale model.

"Jesus, she's turned into a zombie," Olly said with a dark chuckle, looking at the visibly trembling Lana.

"Naw, she's still human," Joey said and stepped away from the Arrivals and Departures display she had been looking at. "Private jets aren't listed on the Arrivals board so we don't know when her father will show up."

"I hope he's here before she wears a hole in the concrete floor," Rebecca said and snuggled up into Olly's strong grip.

The words had hardly left Rebecca's mouth before Lana's sixth sense seemed to kick in, and she slowed down her frantic movements and turned around. Facing the corridors leading in from the runways, she put her hands down her sides and let her shoulders slump down from the impossibly high angle they had been at.
Joey soon eyed a man in his mid-sixties with well-groomed gray hair and a fancy gray business suit who was walking out of the corridor pulling a trolley behind him. The man held a definite family resemblance to Lana, even down to the way his eyes were set in his face. "I'll bet you a box of stogies that's him," Joey said and began to feel a bit nervous on her lover's behalf.

"No deal, Skip," Olly said, looking at Lana's body language. "That's him, all right… and I think Lana just pooped her pants. Uh, figuratively speaking, of course."

Seeing her father walk into the terminal with a look on his face that clearly showed he was looking for her made Lana's throat constrict all over again. From one second to the next, her breathing came in painful bursts and she had to force herself to breathe normally so she wouldn't pass out.

As she set off to close the distance between herself and her father, a nervous chill raced up and down her spine - and everywhere else for that matter - that made goosebumps break out all over her body, and she knew that the smile she had on her face looked horrifyingly fake.

When Alfred Ferguson spotted his daughter coming towards him, he stopped and let go of the trolley so he could put out his arms. "Oh hello, sweetheart! I've missed you!" he said, wearing a genuine smile.

A few seconds later, Lana fell into her father's embrace with a choked-up "Hello, Daddy," wrapped her arms around his body and hugged him fiercely. The scent of her father's characteristic aftershave gave her a modicum of comfort, but it only lasted until the hug ended.

Pulling back from the hug, Alfred cocked his head as he took in his daughter's appearance. "There's something changed about you… but I can't… hmmm. You really are in love, aren't you?" he said in a friendly voice, putting his hand on Lana's cheek.

"I, uh… Oh, wait until you see Reb… I mean, Miss Stern. She has really changed!" Lana said, snickering nervously.

"Oh? Darling, will you please get the trolley? I brought down a few papers I need to look at tonight at the hotel, but it's so heavy it's nearly pulling my shoulder off."

"Of course, Daddy," Lana said and put her hand on the handlebar of the heavy trolley.

Walking back towards her waiting friends, a rock hard knot of terror began to form in Lana's stomach. There were so many things she needed to explain to her father, not the least of which that they weren't even staying at a hotel but on the Argo.

"Sugar, who are your friends…?" Alfred said as he spotted the three women waiting by the information stand. When he recognized Rebecca Stern, he rubbed his eyes several times. "Oh…! That's… That's Miss Stern! With loose hair and casual clothing!"

"Yes, Daddy. I told you that she had changed, ha ha," Lana said, feeling worse for every step.

"Goodness me, has she ever! Hello, I've never noticed that she's a real looker!"

"Daddy!"

"Just teasing you, sweetheart," Alfred said with a smile.

"Well… of course. Ha, ha." - Suddenly realizing that she could use Rebecca and Olly as a yardstick to gauge how her father felt about lesbian relationships, Lana drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "She has found someone
here, too, Daddy. The dark-skinned woman standing next to her," she said, immediately feeling horribly bad for exploiting her friends like that.

"Oh… I'm… I'm sorry? Rebecca Stern is one of those people? But…" Alfred said, slowing down on their way to the information stand. "Surely not… she's so pretty!"

'Oh, that went well,' Lana said, cringing inside. "The exterior doesn't have anything to do with what's in a person's heart, Daddy."

"Well, I should know. You mother was a knockout and yet she couldn't wait to get her hooks into my wallet at the divorce settlement… but that's a story for another day. Hello, Miss Stern," Alfred said and put out his hand.

Rebecca stepped forward and assumed her old, obedient role. "Good evening, Mr. Ferguson. As you can see, there's been some change here."

"I'll say!" Alfred said, studying Olly - but at the same time trying very hard to appear like he wasn't studying her. What he saw confused him. The dark-skinned woman was buff, with toned, even muscular arms and legs, yet her face held a natural grace and her stance was anything but stereotypically masculine. "Uh… you're much prettier with your hair down, Miss Stern."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Ferguson. Here, I'm officially handing in my resignation," Rebecca said and gave Alfred a white envelope that had his name written on it.

"Oh… oh dear. I'll miss you, Miss Stern. You were an excellent secretary."

"That's too kind, Mr. Ferguson. I've discovered there's more to life than taking dictation," Rebecca said with a smile, pulling Olly closer to her.

"Mmmm. Yes…"

Swallowing a nervous lump in her throat, Lana stepped up to stand next to Joey, hoping that some of the Skipper's calmness would rub off on her. "Daddy, here are the two sailors you've heard so much about, Dominique Hofstaedter and Josephine Swain…"

Hearing her real given name for the first time in years was quite a shock to Joey, and she couldn't stop her eyes from popping wide open - a few seconds later, they narrowed down into blue slits and she shot Lana a dark look. Grumbling inwardly, she put out her hand and waited for Alfred to shake it while she thought about the identity of the culprit who had ratted out her real name.

"Oh… Dom Hofstaedter and Joey Swain… right. Pleased to meet you both. Oh, I have to admit that I'm a bit overwhelmed," he said, shaking hands with the two sailors.

'It'll only get worse, Daddy,' Lana thought, but kept up her appearances. "Mmmm, yes, I think we should get out to our car now. It's getting a little late and there's something we need to tell you bef… uh, before we…"

Nodding, Alfred put his arm around his daughter's shoulders. "All right. Have you rented a limo?"

"Uh… not exactly, no," Lana said, once again cringing so bad on the inside that she felt her heart skip a beat.

"Let me get the trolley. I'm sure you have plenty of things to talk about," Joey said and grabbed the heavy trolley.

"Thank you, Miss Swain. That's very kind of you," Alfred said and began to walk slowly towards the exit.
"That's Joey or Skipper, Mr. Ferguson. I won't answer to anything else."

Turning around, Alfred began to study the other beefy sailor. Built like a rectangular brick, the woman in the loud Hawaiian shirt had a certain air about her that he wasn't used to meeting in women - but at the same time, like her dark-skinned associate, she was very beautiful. All in all, Alfred Ferguson felt mightily confused. "Oh... I see... Skipper."

"Much better, Sir," Joey said, flashing the merchant banker a broad, toothy smile that really transformed her face.

Exiting the terminal building, Lana turned right to get over to the Land Cruiser. "Daddy, you have to understand that there aren't really any limos here on St. Thomas. Everybody drives SUVs because the streets are so steep," she said as they arrived at the car.

"Oh..." Alfred said, staring at the cream-colored SUV. "That's okay, I'm familiar with them. I have a Range Rover, after all," he said with a smile.

Returning the smile, Joey unlocked the hatchback and put the heavy trolley into the rear of the car, lifting it off the ground seemingly without effort.

"Daddy, I think Rebecca and Oll... I mean, Dominique should take the rear bench. You and me can sit on the center bench. Okay?"

"Sure, sweetheart. No problem," Alfred said and held the door open for the others.

Once everyone was in place, Joey started the engine and reversed out of the parking space.

Driving around the parking lot adhering to the ten miles an hour speed limit, Lana had plenty of time to come up with the perfect angle to tell her father about the sleeping arrangements - but even so, she had trouble putting words to her thoughts. "Daddy, I..."

"Darling, when are you going to introduce me to the young fellow you've met? I can't wait to meet the man who's stolen my little girl's heart," Alfred said and took Lana's hand in his own.

"Well, Daddy, I..." Lana croaked, feeling the knot of terror in her stomach chomp away at her innards.

Up front, Joey minded the driving, but as they turned onto Route Thirty to get back to the harbor, she grew increasingly irritated with Lana for not coming clean with her father once and for all. When she heard Lana choke and splutter on the relatively straightforward question, she began to tap her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel.

Lana wanted to wring her hands but knew it would be misinterpreted. "Oh, Daddy, I have a little s- surprise for you. I know you e- expect to... to... s- stay at a hotel, but we've had really bad experiences with the hotels here, so... so... we've arranged that you'll spend the night at the Argo, the Skipper's boat."

"I'm sorry? Spend the night on a boat? Well..." Alfred said, scrunching up his face at the suggestion.

"Joey has promised to make her world famous tuna and pasta casserole and we have soda and a very special spiced rum and it'll be so much fun, Daddy," Lana said, rambling away in a voice that didn't sound like her own at all. "Oh, please say yes."

"Well... all right. I've never been able to say no to you, sweetheart. You know that," Alfred said and gave his daughter's hands a little squeeze. "Oh! Of course... you've invited your special friend to the dinner, too, right? Of course you have. Silly me!" he continued with a warm laugh.
Looking up, Lana caught a brief glimpse in the rear view mirror of one of Joey's sky blue eyes that sent her a slightly disapproving glare. Gulping, Lana looked away and concentrated on the scenery that went by in a colorful blur.

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Forty-five minutes later, Joey took the steaming hot casserole off the stove and distributed it equally between the five plates that had been placed on the melamine-plated table in the pantry.

Once the pot was empty, she opened the fridge and took five cans of soda - remembering to take a Diet Coke for Lana - and put them next to the plates.

"Supper's served," she said as she sat down and took her fork.

She, Olly and Rebecca dug in at once, but Lana just stared at the food with a faintly green sheen covering her face. Gulping, she cracked open her can of soda and poured a healthy amount into her glass. When she picked it up, her hand trembled so badly that it produced waves in the glass, but she quickly drank enough of the Coke to stop anyone from noticing.

"Well, it definitely smells deliciously, Skipper," Alfred said and took his fork. After stabbing one of the pieces of tuna, he nibbled at it to test the quality. When he realized that it tasted as great as it smelled, his face lit up in a smile and went to work on his share.

"So," he said between bites, "Lana told me over the phone that you have found several gold artifacts?"

"That's right, Mr. Ferguson," Rebecca said. "We have found twelve items. They're safely stored in the storage cabin down the hall. We're planning on donating them to a local museum, actually."

"Oh, really?" Alfred said and looked proudly at his daughter.

"Yes," Rebecca continued. "We thought it was the proper thing to do. Which reminds me… I received my injury trying to take a gold cup. I've literally just realized that if we had been able to retrieve it, we would have had thirteen items. And with all the superstitions on boats, well…!"

Chuckling, Joey paused briefly and looked up at the secretary. "Mmmm!" she said, nodding to herself. "That could explain a few things. Eh, Olly?"

"Definitely, Skip. But I've made sure that no one has whistled yet. Of course, we can't do much about the 'no women on boats' rule," Olly said with a broad grin, suddenly remembering the one thing that would negate the curse when it came to women aboard boats - if they ever appeared naked, it would appease the water gods enough for them to lift the curse. "Naw, on second thoughts, we've got that covered as well," she said, making most of the entire dinner party laugh even though they didn't know what she meant.

When Alfred noticed that his daughter was just pushing her tuna and pasta around on the plate instead of eating it, he put down his fork and turned to face her. "Baby… what's on your mind? Somehow, I don't think it's got anything to do with the fact that your dinner date hasn't arrived yet…?"

Lana looked up and locked eyes with Joey. After a few seconds, she looked down at her hands that had fallen into her lap.

Sensing that crunch time was near for her friend, Rebecca poked Olly in the side to get her to scoot away from the bench.
Olly nodded, understanding what was about to happen. The two women quickly left the pantry with their plates and soda cans and walked down to the stairs at the end of the narrow hallway.

"But she has, Daddy…" Lana whispered hoarsely.

The truth finally dawned on Alfred and he put down his fork on the plate and leaned back on the bench. "Oh," was his only comment, looking at his daughter and then at Joey who nodded briefly in return.

The silence soon became so oppressive that Lana couldn't stop the tears from coming. As she wept in silence, she cursed her waterworks that always came at the wrong moments, but she didn't do anything to wipe away her tears.

Joey did, however, by getting up from her chair and moving it next to Lana's. Reaching out ahead of her, the Skipper silently pulled her sobbing lover into a hug and ran her fingers across the wet cheeks. Once Lana had settled down somewhat, Joey wrapped her arms around Lana's waist, offering her some warmth and comfort, not to mention a shoulder to rest her head on.

Nearly two minutes went by before Alfred finally cleared his throat. "Well. This certainly changes a few things. What about Jason Connell?"

When Lana didn't answer, Alfred shrugged and scratched his temple. "Well. I… oh… I think I already knew about you, sweetheart. There was just something there that I couldn't… well. It doesn't really matter what I could or couldn't."

Another minute went by without either of them saying anything, but once again, Alfred was the one to break the silence by chuckling quietly. "I do know one thing, though. I see more love here than I've ever had with any of my ex-wives. Baby…? Are you happy here?"

Lana sniffed loudly and nodded into Joey's strong embrace.

"That's all that matters to me. Miss Swain… Skipper… would you mind giving my daughter and I some time to ourselves?" Alfred said, offering Joey a smile.

"Not at all, Sir," Joey said quietly. "I'll be on the bridge if you need me. Just call my name and I'll be here," she whispered into Lana's ear, giving her a quick kiss on the side of her fair head.

Once Joey had left the pantry, Alfred went back to his tuna and pasta casserole, stabbing the fork into a stack of *pasta penne* and scooped them into his mouth. "Not only does the Skipper look like a dream, she's a great cook, too," he said once he had finished chewing, hoping to lighten up Lana's mood.

"Yes," Lana said quietly. "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad? No. Never. Confused… yes. I have to admit that. When did you know?"

"I guess I've always known."

"Always? I thought you only got to know her this past Monday?" Alfred said, feeling even more confused.

"Oh… uh. No, uh… yes, I did. It just sort of snuck up on me," Lana said, furrowing her brow. "But about myself… I've always known."

"Hmmm. And why didn't you tell me? Mmmm?" Alfred said, leaning in towards his daughter.
"Oh, I… wanted to. More than once. I just never…" Lana said, but got no further.

"Because you were afraid of how I would react when you told me?"

Lana just nodded silently.

"You needn't have been, darling. Haven't I always supported you? I'll support you now, too. I'm… I'm sort of confused, no doubt about that… no, that's not the right word. Ah, I guess I'll work it out eventually… but never mind that now. I support you, Lana. With all of my heart. I just want my little girl to be happy. If you're happy, I'm happy."

"Oh, Daddy!" Lana howled and broke out into a wild sob. Pushing her chair back, she put out her arms and flew into her father's embrace, nearly knocking him off the bench as she did so.

"Baby, are you going to stay down here? I mean, for good?"

"I think so…"

"What about your apartment in New York? I think I'd keep it if I were you… you know, just in case it doesn't work," Alfred said, moving a few locks of damp hair out of his daughter's eyes.

"It'll work. We'll make it work!" Lana said decisively.

Greatly impressed by the change that had happened to his daughter over the course of a few days, Alfred just smiled broadly and pulled her into a new hug.

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"What do you suppose is going on down there?" Olly said, leaning against the plotting table and stabbing her last piece of tuna with her fork.

"Oh, you know," Rebecca said, sitting in the Captain's chair.

"Heh. Do you know how my Dad worked out I was queer? It was so easy for him. For some reason, I didn't speak until I was nearly two, but my first word when I did speak was 'Wanna.' It came one day when he was watching teevee… a rerun of the previous year's Miss America contest," Olly said wearing a cheesy grin.

Finding a cigar in her pocket, Joey put it in her mouth but reconsidered lighting it at the last moment. "And you haven't stopped wantin' since."

"No way, Skip! And I hope I never will. Uh, of course, these days, I've got all I could ever want right here," Olly said and reached down to tickle Rebecca's ear.

"Nice save, Dominique," Rebecca said and leaned into the touch.

Behind them, a loud sniffle was the first hint that Lana and her father were on their way up to the bridge. Standing up straight, Joey put her cigar back into her pocket and furrowed her brow, wondering what the immediate future would hold for them.

"Hi, everybody. Sorry I've been so out of it today," Lana said with her arm wrapped tightly around her father's waist.

"Today… and yesterday… and the day before…" Rebecca said, winking at her friend.
"Oh, ha ha… I know. But anyway, everything is good now. And I do mean everything. Right, Daddy?"

"Yes. No ifs, buts or maybes," Alfred said and gave his daughter a little squeeze.

"Please, Joey…?" Lana said and put out her arms.

Smiling, Joey accepted the invitation and slid into her lover's arms. After a few seconds of simply looking deeply into each other's eyes, she leaned down and gave Lana a warm, loving kiss on the lips.

Blushing slightly, Alfred stared wide-eyed at the tender scene, but he soon looked away to give his daughter some privacy. "Well. Like I said below… there's more love here than in any of my marriages," he said and let out an embarrassed chuckle that made the others laugh.

"Joey, I have an idea… my father thinks his back wouldn't be up for a night in one of the bunks, so-" Lana said.

"I hope you won't mind, Skipper? I know it's a bit rude," Alfred said.

"Of course not, Sir."

"Hey, will you let me speak? I was speaking there, you know," Lana said and nudged a finger into Joey's colorful Hawaiian shirt. "Anyway, I've promised that I'd escort him up to one of the hotels a little later on. But first… would you mind singing a song for us…? Please…? Pretty please with chocolate sprinkles on top?"

"Yeah, Skip! Sing, sing, sing, sing!" Olly and Rebecca chanted as one.

"Oh, all right. Do you have a particular one in mind, Lana?"

"No, no. I'm sure you know a good one for such a happy occasion…?"

"Well… uh… I'll think of something. C'mon, let's go downstairs so I can get my guitar," Joey said and began to move towards the stairs.

"Yippie!" Lana said and skipped after her lover.

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Back in the pantry - after quickly doing the dishes - Joey stood with her leg up on one of the chairs like a veteran folk singer. Pulling the strap for her guitar over her head, she quickly tuned the strings and then began to think about which song to sing.

"The Chandler's Wife, Skipper?" Olly said with a grin as she and Rebecca slid into the bench with their arms wrapped around each other.

"A little too racy, Olly."

"Creation Of A Pus-?"

"No! Not in a million years," Joey said abruptly, cutting off Olly before she could mention the title of the outrageously bawdy song.

"Okay. How about Rolling Home?"
Looking up, Joey thought about it briefly, finally arriving at the conclusion that the wistful song would be a perfect way to mark that while one chapter was closing, another would soon be starting for all of them. "Yeah, Olly. Rolling Home would be good. Okay, here goes…"

'Up aloft amid the rigging

Swiftly blows the favoring gale

Strong as springtime in its blossom

Filling out each swelling sail

And the waves we leave behind us

Seem to murmur as they rise

We have tarried here to bear you

To the land you dearly prize

Full ten thousand miles behind us

A mere hundred miles before

Ancient ocean waves to waft us

To the well remembered shore

Cheer up lassie bright smiles await you

From the fairest of the fair

And her loving eyes will greet you

With kind welcomes everywhere

Call all hands to man the capstan

See the cable run down clear

Heave away and with a will, gals

For old Norfolk we will steer
And we’ll sing in joyful chorus
In the watches of the night
And we’ll sight the shores of Virginia
When the gray dawn brings the light

Rolling home rolling home across the sea
Rolling home to dear old Virginia, rolling home dear land to thee.

"Oh! That was so good, Joey!" Lana said and let out a loud whistle.
"Excellent stuff, Skip!" Olly and Rebecca said as one, clapping loudly.

Taking off her guitar, Joey sat down on the chair and reached out to grab one of Lana's hands. "Thanks. It was fun."

"Wow, not only is she gorgeous and can cook, she can sing, too! If she can work an ironing board, I might butt in on you, sweetheart. She could be the third Mrs. Ferguson," Alfred said with a broad grin on his face.

"No chance, Daddy. No chance at all," Lana said and locked eyes with the woman she was sure she would be spending the rest of her life with: Joey Swain, former US Navy diver, fishing tour operator, protector of the weak - and the most tender lover she could ever hope to find.

Right there and then, Lana Ferguson understood that she had found heaven on Earth… and she intended to stay there for good.

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THE END.