

STRANDED

The island that did not exist



By Chris Deggs

This is a work of fiction apart from the bits that aren't

Dedication

Writing is an exciting and lonely task and I want to dedicate this story to the two wonderful women who have helped me in this journey. First of all I want to thank Lynn Haines, my partner and best friend who has been a tremendous help in the publishing of this my latest book. It is such a comfort to read the story out loud with someone as enthusiastic as Lynne, who also has a keen eye for detail and picks up on errors I may well miss. I also want to thank Patty French, my co-author on our 'Stealth' trilogy, who has edited many of my books while keeping me on the right track. Thank you very much Lynne and Patty for your wonderful support. Your help with my writing projects is always very much appreciated.

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Prologue

It was freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly that went first. But surely that went against the much revered American Constitution. Slowly and surely the previously unthinkable happened right under their noses. Yet people still did not see it. They were like sheep, too busy eating the grass to notice the tags in their ears. Many of them remained completely oblivious, not just to the writing on the wall, but to the wall itself. Various militias armed themselves and fought for their civil rights. This became a serious problem for the Arnold government, which reacted by militarising the police force; giving its officers greater powers of arrest. Anyone daring to speak out about diminished human rights was arrested and charged with anything from affray to sedition. The Arnold Administration finally imposed martial law on the good citizens of the United States of America. The people still had social media platforms to air their views and grievances. But that was also changing as more stringent rules increased censorship, clamping down on any anti-government videos or articles that did not follow the mainstream narrative. Next, the Arnold government applied a more restrictive muzzle, banning all forms of demonstration. The Ringleaders of such public actions were arrested many of whom got swallowed up in the system, sometimes never to be seen again.

The nation was sitting on a powder keg. Many powder kegs in the form of the state militias, who had no respect for the rule of corrupt laws and strong arm order, when concocted by duplicitous politicians feathering their nests. The patriots had nothing but utter contempt for the police as they were automatons doing the will of the corrupt political cartel in Washington DC. Violence erupted in pockets all around the US.

Denji Ogawa, an American national, from Tokyo, who loved his adopted country came up with a website, he called "Wetopia". It was a blog of sorts but it became much bigger than that. Wetopia became a rallying cry for anyone with the eyes to see the globalist" plan becoming realty. It was apparent that the powerful nations of the western world were voting in right wing governments, some of which introduced police states. Aware people, like Denji, shook their heads in disbelief as Fascism got a foothold in most western societies. It was much easier for the world puppet masters to get hard conservative governments to strip citizens of their rights under the pretense of saving them. Those people among the citizenry who still had a Cyber voice discovered that the search engine spiders limited Internet searches to the narrative view, especially regarding contentious subjects. After a mystery flu-like virus took hold in China and spread to the rest of the world, Global government came out of the shadows and openly took away the peoples' right of movement by making the public stay at home. The police was given the power to enter a person's private domain, and, if they had been logged illegally leaving their home, arrest them and test them for the alleged virus. New buzz words like 'social distancing' and 'lockdown' became part of everyone's vernacular. Wetopia, an unbiased information channel became a very popular soapbox for millions of the unempowered and disenfranchised. At first, people fought the system, a political model that took a hard line against its citizenry. It bandied around the well-used mantra, "We don't want to control you, we are protecting you for your own good". The price was a loss of freedom. Not that the people had any choice in the matter. And those choices became less as the cloud controllers that had access to all stored computer files, shared their data with national security agencies.

The next stage of the global coup was to make computers without hard drives, so everything had to be saved online. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Smart people backed up their personal information on external memory drives. They seemed secure until USB, and micro USB ports didn't work any more. Then the global government had the people where they wanted them –with no civil rights and no will to fight for them.

Military-grade 5G, which was rapidly rolled out all over the globe, made big brother look totally amateurish. Anyone who did not embrace the rule of law soon found they no longer had access to their cloud accounts. They became non-citizens no longer able to function in society. Artificial Intelligence now had total control of people's lives, and there was nothing they could do about it. More and more people wandered the streets, homeless and hopeless, and life became increasingly unbearable. The only platform left for citizens to express their views was on social media. Then the government extended the anti gathering laws to include to the Internet, and increasing numbers of truth-seeking people got shut out as social media platforms that did not follow Arnold's narrative, got closed down.

That was it for Denji Ogawa. He and his core Wetopia peeps, could not stand living under the brutal dictatorship any longer. It was time to leave. But with border security everywhere, how could they escape and where would they go? Wetopia had to go dark to survive. It became one of the shady sites on the "Dark Web" which had greater security in place. Here real people, not tropes, could share anti establishment ideas, one of which was to find a way to escape Arnold's dystopian society.

Chapter 1

Jerry Byrne knew deep down he would make it to the shore. He didn't know how he survived the battering waves, but he did. Exhausted, using up the last vestiges of energy, Jerry took a few faltering steps and collapsed onto the damp sand. His final thought as he drifted into sleep was, at least I'm still alive.

Zoe Byrne stumbled forwards, knocked on her face by a wave as she scrambled ashore. Standing 5' 7 tall, and thin, like a fashion model, she had long straight red hair and sensitive skin that shielded

clear of direct sunlight. Picking herself up, Zoe pressed onward to the beach. Despite the traumatic experience, her mouth shaped the semblance of a smile, as she saw the irony of her situation. She was in the middle of reading 'The Dark beast of Grimble Island', about a woman who is shipwrecked. Now it had happened to her. Zoe wondered where Jerry had got to. They had been separated in the sea between the ship and the beach. The adrenaline was still pumping, but her physical body refused to take her much further.

Denji Ogawa felt every one of his 63 years. He had stacked on some extra kilos lately and that had not helped him make it to the safety of the beach. He was cold and wet and pulled his bedraggled cloak about him. Denji's instinct told him not to go on the voyage. He wished he had kept his job at the Harrington Hotel, where he had worked for over ten years. But he did not have a green card and the Immigration Department had become much stricter. Illegal immigrants were treated much more harshly since the extreme right republican party had swept into power on a wave of hate and racist persecution. Denji was born in Japan, where he spent his early years. He enjoyed living in America, but he knew his time was running out.

Nariko Osako looked good for her age. At 73 she was the oldest passenger from the stricken vessel. As with most Japanese women, she was small in stature. But she looked after herself and remained fit and healthy. So much so that she helped another passenger, a tall 50-year-old man, reach the shore. She left him lying on the sand and walked up the beach to the tree line that offered some protection from the wind.

Amaryllis Riya managed to secure a place on the only lifeboat launched from the MV Delaware. So she was one of the first passengers to hit the cold, dark beach. Like her companions, she had to wade to the shore, soaking the hem of the long peasant-style dress she wore.

Amaryllis, at almost 6 feet and muscular, was intimidating to most people. She was actually compassionate and would not cause anyone unnecessary pain. But, caught up in a life-threatening disaster, it was another story. She used her strength to push and shove for a seat in the lifeboat. On reflection, Amaryllis was not at risk. But at the time in the stormy darkness, she had no idea how far from land they were.

Having reached the beach, Amaryllis slumped down on the damp sand, exhausted.

Namir Chouhan felt himself panicking. His world had been turned upside down; the new one was unrecognisable. In fact, he did not recognise it as his world. It was a strange place with no sense of order. It was traumatic enough to be stuck outside his comfortable life when he boarded the ship. But now he found himself on a remote beach exposed to the elements. He was scold, wet and unsure of anything except he had to abandon ship with all the others. Suhana had been close to him, guiding him through the rough waves to the shore. But what had happened to her? Where was his sister?

Suhana Chouhan had always been the strong protective one. The decision for Namir to Leave America and sail to New Zealand had been trying for him. In fact, it was his sister who had persuaded him. Suhana had always been the adventurous one of the siblings, eager to take on new experiences. She often joked with her brother that her sense of adventure made up for his habitual life, which seemed like no life at all to her. Namir was just getting used to his new routine when disaster struck. He was too terrified to go in the lifeboat, so Suhana waited with the remaining passengers and walked through the churning water to reach the shore. The sand beneath her feet was smooth and quite level. But the odd dip or submerged rocks caught her unawares. Suhana tripped on a rock and fell just as one of the bigger waves crashed over her. She let go of Namir's arm as she attempted to right her balance. A second big wave swamped her and by the time she had stood up. Namir was nowhere to be seen.

Al O'Neill was a big man. He stood at 6 feet five inches, but his body had gone to fat. He had a flat nose resulting from his brief amateur boxing career. Alexander O'Neill was an Orange man through and through. He was on the IRA's most wanted list, so he escaped to Washington DC. He was wealthy enough to procure a fake Green card, which held him in good stead for many years. Now, the new regime had clamped down hard on illegal immigrants, making him feel insecure. , as the social media reported people discovered with fake green cards were sen to detention camps that did

not officially exist. Al pondered his past sins as he lay sprawled, breathing slowly on an isolated beach.

Chapter 2

Diesel Becker awoke to find himself face down on damp sand with his head turned to one side. He opened his eyes to discover he was on the beach. The rhythm of the incoming tide filled his ears. That and the raucous cry of gulls, as they wheeled around looking for fish. What was he doing laying on a beach? He wondered. Diesel rose to his feet and stretched, tensing his muscles. He stood at 5 feet 11 and had an athletic build. He was proud of the way he had looked after himself and thought he looked pretty damn good for a 45-year-old. But He did not like his profile, which showed him to have a hook nose. Diesel became self-conscious of his nose at school, where some of the kids called him 'Jew boy'. This playground cruelty haunted him, affecting his self-image. Diesel was convinced that his nose was the first thing people saw, but most people were too polite to mention it. The truth was that none of his friends and acquaintances took any notice of his nose as it did not matter to them. But Diesel was convinced it made him look ugly. He considered it a cruel quirk of fate when compared with the rest of his well-balanced physical body. Snapping out of his reverie, Diesel looked out at sea and saw the ship, which tilted at an awkward angle. Then what had happened came flooding back. The MV Delaware had been gutted on a rocky reef, and he had given the order to abandon ship.

Diesel had skippered freighters for a good ten years, and he'd never grounded a ship before. The fierce tropical storm had made it difficult for him to stick to his course. But, according to his navigation charts, he was so far from any land forms that they were in no danger. That was until he heard that horrendous grating noise when they hit the rocky reef. But how could that be? The sharp rocks weren't supposed to be there. Yet here he was, on the beach of an island that did not to all intents and purposes actually exist.

Diesel turned his attention to the beach and the other survivors. Many passengers sat on the damp sand, no doubt wondering where the hell they were. Some people huddled together, others sat silently looking out to sea. Diesel's attention went back to his ship. Stuck on the sharp exposed reef, the stricken vessel, listed to starboard. Diesel figured she was grounded around 200 metres from the beach, so near and yet so far.

Then the Captain heard a voice and recognised it as belonging to Bart Murphy, his first mate. Bart stood tall and gangling. He had developed a bit of a stoop over the 30 years he had worked in cramped engine rooms.

Diesel waited for his lanky friend to reach him, then he said, 'Looks like we're in a bit of a pickle.' Bart, a positive thinker, said, 'It could have been worse, Skipper. At least we got ship-wrecked near land. Then he pointed at the Delaware, 'At least she didn't sink.'

Diesel looked at the people scattered around the beach. 'They look lost, Murph. We need to get hold of the passenger manifest to see if they're all accounted for.'

Bart rubbed his Buzz cut hair. 'It's probably out there on the ship.'

Diesel brushed away strands of his long loose tangled hair. 'Gather together the other crew members. We need to have a meeting.'

Bart accepted his underdog role. He had never felt comfortable in a leadership role and was happy to be Skipper's gopher. He looked at Diesel. 'Aye, aye Skipper, I'll get onto it.'

With the storm over, Diesel felt the warmth of the morning sun on his face. He looked at the now cloudless azure sky. There was an intermittent light breeze, which felt pleasant on the skin. As Murphy would have said, 'A perfect day to be ship-wrecked, he mused. Then his sharp hazel eyes spotted something further down the beach. It was a lifeboat off the Delaware. Somebody had the foresight to launch one of the ships three boats in the storm. He watched as a short woman tried to push it out into the water. The Captain went over to help her.

Godiva Canterbury, although measuring just five feet was much stronger than she looked. She applied her full strength to get the boat afloat. She exerted every muscle as the rowing boat moved with agonising slowness into the sea. Godiva's face contorted under strain, but she would not give

up. People who knew her were not surprised. She was known for her aggressive and demanding nature. To be fair, she was mostly demanding of herself. Godiva's broad jawline and small turned-up nose put Diesel in mind of one of those claymation characters with a big mouth and prominent teeth. Unlike Diesel, Godiva had long since given up feeling self-conscious about her looks and applied herself to more practical matters, like launching the lifeboat. Which turned out to be a Herculean task.

Todd Lowen, another survivor, seeing the man and the woman struggling with the boat, offered his help. Although Todd was also short, he was muscular and had powerful upper body strength. He pitched in, and they soon had the boat sliding across the damp sand close to the sea. Then Todd went to the prow of the vessel and pulled it, his bronzed skin emphasising his rippling arm and shoulder muscles.

Godiva checked him out with her dark brown eyes. She figured he must work out, in a gym or something, doing weights. Whatever, she welcomed his help.

With the help of the two men, Godiva soon had the little vessel in shallow water. Diesel held onto the small rowboat as Godiva and Todd climbed in.

Todd said, 'Thanks, I can take it from here.'

Diesel said, 'Where are you going?'

Godiva said, 'Out to the Delaware.'

Diesel said, 'I'm coming with you. Nobody is allowed on the Delaware without a crew member accompanying them.'

Todd stared at him. 'Are you a crew member?'

'I'm Diesel Becker, the skipper of the Delaware.'

'Sorry, Captain, I didn't recognise you without your cap.'

Diesel instinctively touched his head, as though to see if his cap was still there. Of course, it was not. 'Yes, well I'm still in charge.'

The Captain's rules brought out Todd's rebellious streak. His thick eyebrows crinkled up. 'With respect Captain, you don't get to make the rules anymore.'

Diesel climbed into the rowboat. He eye-balled Todd. 'On my boat, I do.'

Godiva tried lightening the mood. 'I know you men are into staking out territory, but none of us is going to get out to the ship if you two keep arguing. It's much better if you put your energy into rowing this damn boat.'

Suitably admonished, Becker and Lowen took an oar each and started rowing out to the wreck.

Diesel addressed Godiva. 'I saw you struggling with this boat so whatever you're after must be important to you.'

Godiva's shoulder-length brown hair was naturally curly and usually elaborately styled. Now it was tangled and lank. She said, 'My hair's a mess. I need my toiletries.'

'And you?' he asked Todd.

Todd said, 'My daughter wants her bracelets.' Todd added, 'I know it may not seem important, but I promised to get them for her.'

Diesel thought it odd what the ship-wrecked passengers thought was important. But he didn't try to understand the ways of others. He lived by the motto live and let live.'

'What about you, Captain?' Godiva asked as they approached the reef.

Diesel turned to Godiva. 'I need my charts to figure out where we are.'

Todd, a computer programmer, said, 'I thought all that stuff was digital these days.'

Diesel, who was old school, when it came to mapping. He said, 'Not the way I do it.'

Rowing out to the stricken ship was one thing; boarding it was a whole different story. The Delaware, designed as a multi-purpose freighter, to carry different kinds of loading on the same voyage, lay at a 30-degree angle, making it very difficult to climb up the hull onto the deck. They rowed around to the other side of the ship; only to find it had its own problems. Namely, the exposed reef was home to many dangerous animals, that lived on the rocky flat and inter tidal area. Despite his ship being out of action, Diesel still saw himself as the Captain of the vessel. As such, owing to his chivalrous nature, he always felt a sense of responsibility to his passengers. Diesel

stepped out of the boat onto the rocks. He grabbed the rope Todd threw him and secured the small boat by tying it around a pinnacle of rock, about four feet high. He helped Godiva and Todd out of the rowboat onto the rocky shelf. He warned, 'The reef may look harmless enough, but there are all kinds of creatures that inject toxins that can seriously injure or even kill you. So, watch where you step.'

Godiva, who tended to become excitable in stressful situations, nervously declared, 'I don't like the sound of that.'

'Maybe it's best if you stay here,' Diesel suggested.

'What, because I'm a woman?' she snapped, bristling at what she saw to be his sexist comment.

Diesel, who had better things to do than argue with the aggressive woman, said, 'Please yourself.'

He added, 'Just watch out for things like cone shells, stinging hydroids, and stone fish. If you tread on one of these, you'll wish you had stayed in the lifeboat.'

Having reached the hull of the Delaware with no casualties, Diesel looked up at the deck and scratched his head through his knotted hair. The way the ship listed its floor was about twenty feet above the coral reef, making it difficult for Diesel to climb on board. But, he had to find a way to get onto the sad-looking ship. 'If we had a long enough rope and a grappling hook I could climb up onto the deck,' He muttered mostly to himself.

Todd took it upon himself to walk around the ship while paying attention to Becker's warning. He was surprised by the vessel's size, which looked much more significant when he was so close to the hull. As he made his way alongside the ship, He came across a section of the hull ripped open by the sharp rocks that had gouged a hole some twelve feet long, as the Delaware ran aground. Todd whistled to get Becker's attention.

Diesel and Godiva approached Todd and saw the large gouged opening. 'I reckon we can enter through the hole,' Diesel commented.

Todd, having already figured that, said, 'I'll take a look inside.'

Diesel blocked his path. 'That's my job.'

Todd argued, 'I'm shorter than you so it will be easier for me to fit through the gap.'

Diesel countered, 'I know the layout of the lower decks. So I'm going in.'

Godiva, tutted, 'If you two are going to stand here arguing all day, we're not going to get anything done.'

Todd frowned creasing his thick eyebrows and calmed himself. It did not take much to unleash his rebellious nature when he felt challenged in an uncomfortable situation. Thinly smiling, he said, 'Go ahead, skipper.'

It would be a tight squeeze, but Diesel saw it as the only way into the hull. The steel was jagged where the sharp rocks had ripped into it. He had to be very careful he didn't cut himself as he squeezed through the gap into the engine room.

The MV Delaware was powered by engines using bunker fuel, which was cheaper than Diesel. It was still costly as fuel rationing was in place and had been for the last seven months. Armoured police had been brought in to deal with violence at the pumps. Diesel remembered the incident that landed him in trouble with the authorities. It happened when he impersonated a police officer. It was a long story, and he had to stay focused to keep his balance in the confines of the tilting engine room. The odd angle of the floor threw Diesel off at first. By planting his feet on the metal grating floor, he was able to align his body with the 30-degree slant of the ship. But he had a problem with his hair getting in his eyes. He wore it long, and it had dried, tangled. He needed something to tie it back. It was odd and off putting climbing up the ladders between decks at such a weird angle. With the help of a torch, Diesel made it to the bridge. Owing to the incline, his charts had slid off a table onto the floor. But they were undamaged. Diesel gathered them up as best he could. He Diesel found a bunch of maps held together by a thick elastic band. That solved his hair problem for now. Diesel's brain had adjusted to moving around at the odd angle. He made his way to the galley to check on food supplies. Many items and ingredients were mixed together on the floor, but most of the food not needing refrigeration had survived. Diesel had to leave it where it was for now. The Captain wasn't sure how it was going to work out, but if the castaways were to survive, they had to

learn to share. The makeshift passenger berths were also in a mess with bedclothes and personal belongings all mixed up. The clothes would have to stay for now. Still, Diesel grabbed a suitcase and rapidly filled it with Toiletries and makeup and other personal items. He had no idea who's stuff it was. From his experience with Godiva, Diesel had her down as a healthy-minded fussy person who probably only used the most expensive brands. No connoisseur of exclusive labels, Diesel just grabbed what he could. Ms high-and-mighty Godiva Canterbury would have to put up with using cheap shampoo if that is all that was available. Diesel couldn't remember what Todd wanted. Well, that would have to wait.

Todd looked at the short, stout Godiva. If they hadn't been ship-wrecked together, they would probably have never have crossed each others path. He was lower middle class and a registered bankrupt. As a computer programmer, he had done well for himself during the Californian dot com boom. He had gone into business with a partner who cheated him out of his share of the market. But he didn't like to dwell on it. Although Godiva looked bedraggled, Todd could see her clothes were expensive. She was obviously high maintenance. Even if Godiva had been beautiful in the big world, he would have avoided her. But she wasn't a beauty. Her eyes were too far apart and up nose, and small lips seemed too small for her face. Her body had ample curves, but they seemed to be squashed together. Todd pointed inside the ship. 'I wonder where he's got to.'

Godiva, standing in the shade provided by the hull shrugged dismissively, 'He could be hurt or stuck. But I'm not hanging around all day for him. Let's give him another few minutes. If he's not back, let's take the boat and go back to the shore.'

Todd felt uncomfortable leaving the Captain behind. But his tolerance had reached a breaking point. 'Damn it! I'm going in there to look for him.'

Godiva said, 'And what if you get lost? Then I'm stuck here, alone.'

Todd judged Godiva to be a whining, it's all about me, type. Dismissing her plea, he went up to the hole and looked inside. Unlike Diesel, Todd didn't have a torch. He had his phone, but it wasn't working. Water had got into it somewhere between the stricken ship and the shore. Still, cell phones on a desert Island were just about as useful as tits on a bull. Todd's father used to say that when he was a kid. Todd, not his father. Todd thought it interesting that he automatically used his father's analogies without even thinking about them. Concentrating on the task at hand, Todd carefully squeezed through the gap and waited until his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He started walking but found it difficult not to lose his balance on a floor that dipped by 30 degrees. He saw a metal ladder that presumably led to a higher deck. Then Todd heard a noise. It sounded like somebody moving along a metal grating. Then he saw the Captain struggling with a large suitcase. Todd said, 'Hand it to me.'

Diesel did so, which made it easier for him to get down the ladder to the engine room.

Godiva was staring out to sea when she heard Todd's voice.

He said, 'Godiva, get over here and grab this case.'

As Godiva took hold of the case, she misjudged the weight and nearly dropped it. 'What's in here, gold bricks.'

'Ingots,' Todd corrected.

Diesel said, 'things more useful than gold, 'personal shit from the cabins.'

'Is my stuff in the case.'

'I don't know, lady. I just grabbed what I could carry.'

Godiva huffed, 'Let's get off this damn rock.'

The other's agreed and they unmoored the lifeboat.

Chapter 3

Jerry Byrne woke up near some smooth beach boulders dazed and exhausted. He had no idea where he was or the time of day.

The last thing he remembered was being in the churning water with waves crashing around him. He winced as he rubbed his short crinkly hair. He could feel a scab just above his large left ear. It was

sore to the touch. There was also dried blood on his smooth left cheek. Then he thought of Zoe. My God! where is my wife?' his mind screamed. he blinked a few times to adjust to the bright sunlight. Zoe Byrne usually wore immaculate clothes - long dresses and long-sleeved tops, to stop her delicate skin burning in the sun. But she sat on the beach wearing the creased, salt water damaged dress she had slipped on, just prior to abandoning ship. Her large dark eyes glistened with tears that had trailed down her cheeks. Zoe's hand went to her normally shining hair, which now hung wet and bedraggled around her face, and in tangles down her back. As she sat on the sand at the high tide point Zoe went over the frightening events and played over and over in her mind. Jerry and she had been asleep in their compact cabin when the storm hit. The noise of the wind and rain was deafening but even that did not mask the terrible screeching noise that sounded as though the hounds of Hell had been released. She did not know the horrendous racket was the ship's hull being opened like a can as submerged sharp rocks gouged a large hole in its bow. Passengers on the slighting tilting deck, scared, cold and confused pushed their way towards the three lifeboats, one of which was already rocking on the ocean as passengers clambered over the side of the ship. The Delaware, which had been crudely refitted to accommodate its human cargo had only been designed to hold a crew of ten. Now some fifty passengers plus crew were desperately abandoning ship. One of the things Zoe loved about her husband was his smart logical mind. he explained to Zoe that, as the ship had run aground, it was not sinking so there was no need to worry.

Snapped back to the present, Zoe felt strangely detached as the water moved softly around her outstretched fingers, caressing coolly, eddying in its wake. She pulled her hand out and watched the , transparent drips fall from her fingers. They fell as if snatched by gravity into the saline shallows below, each drop distorting the pebbled sea-bed. In the intermittent breeze her hand felt cold, yet her back was warmed by the morning sun, and the back of her neck was in danger of burning. Zoe had to find some shade and as she rose she saw a man approaching. He was lanky and had a lean face with small ears and large lips. His crinkly black hair, beginning to go to gray, was worn in a buzz cut.

Zoe looked up.'Hi.'

The man said, Hi, my name's Bart, what's yours?'

'Zoe.' She looked at him as though in a daze.

Bart said, 'We have to get everyone together, so will you come and join us, Zoe?'

Zoe said, ' Is Jerry up there?'

Bart, like Zoe, had sensitive skin, but unlike her was stripped to the waist.

Bart smiled warmly, 'Who's Jerry?'

'My husband. We got separated in the water.'

Bart wondered why she hadn't been looking for her Jerry instead of sitting by the sea, getting sun burnt. But he was not quick to judge people and did not mention it. 'Well, why don't we go up to the others and see if he's there?'

The question in Zoe's mind was, where was she?' But she didn't ask Bart that one. The last thing she remembered was leaving the stricken ship. She could not erase the terrifying experience in her mind. Zoe and Jerry were snuggled up in their compact cabin when the ship got gutted on the sharp reef rocks. The terrible scraping noise of metal screeching on the rocks had freaked Zoe out. She remembered jerry, awoken by the the racket, sitting bolt upright, nearly hitting his head oh the low ceiling. He was just wearing boxers in the hot cabin. Zoe, just wearing knickers and grabbed the long green dress she had worn out on the deck before the storm hit. Jerry was fumbling around looking for a hat to keep his head dry. Zoe urged him to let it go. They went up to the main deck to see what was going on. The storm, that had been raging for over two hours, seemed relentless as rain lashed against the exposed deck of the stricken ship. The Delaware was only listing by about five degrees. But even that small amount added to the slipperiness of the deck and made it difficult for passengers to keep their footing.

Jerry's mind snapped back to the present. He felt naked without one of his stylised hats to cover his thinning hair. But they were all back on the Delaware. Jerry was self conscious about his premature balding and his hats made him more confident. It was also the reason he kept his hair short, in a

crew cut. He hadn't gone for the completely shaved look, which required much more maintenance. He whistled as he walked along the beach looking for Zoe. His whistling wasn't a happy refrain. It was a nervous symptom of his mild Asperger, brought on by the anxiety of not being able to locate his wife. Jerry went over his memories of the previous night. The passengers, many in blind panic clustered around the only available lifeboat, as it was winched down into the roiling water. Jerry noticed the ship had stopped and seemed to be holding at the same angle. He ushered his terrified wife away from the panicking passengers. Jerry calmed her down telling her the ship wasn't sinking and they could go ashore in the morning. He also said that they could not be far from the shore, in which case they should stay put until daylight. But if the Delaware should start to roll over any more it would be time to abandon ship. Jerry's logic told him that until that time there was nothing to be concerned about. Some of the other passengers were of the same persuasion and they clustered together, finding any shelter they could from the severe tropical storm.

An hour or so later the storm abated, the rain turned to drizzle and Jerry ventured out on deck to try and get a sense of where they were. Then the ship gave another loud grinding groan and tilted a bit more. Jerry grabbed the railing. It was time to make a move. The last time he's set his eyes on Zoe was when they reached the shore. At least he knew she'd made it that far.

Another bout of fatigue hit Jerry and he had to sit down. It was cooler under the shade of a sheoake that was growing near the treeline. Jerry leant back against a low branch, and he nodded off to sleep, lulled by the tidal rhythm. Shortly after he awoke and his mind snapped back to the present. He had to find Zoe. He kept looking along the beach, but to no avail. Surely his wife could not be very far away, he kept telling himself.

Denji Ogawa, the brain behind the "Wetopia" social media platform was proud of his Japanese heritage but in America he used Daniel, his adopted name. He had lived in the US for 15 years and thought of himself as being American rather than his native Japanese. He died his graying hair blonde to help with his Caucasian look. He thought it also made him look younger. He had been on the voyage for two reasons. He had just broken up with his partner of ten years. And because the United States had become progressively dystopian making it almost impossible to survive there, unless he joined the many millions of automatons who mildly accepted their servitude. Daniel was not one of them. At age 61, Denji, had always abided by America's laws, while they used the Constitution as their criteria. But now it was different. Citizens whose ideas conflicted with that of the government either lost their identity among the growing ranks of homeless people or, if the authorities made an example of them, got sent to a detention camp, never to be seen again. For Denji, it was time to get out.

Captain Becker addressed the survivors. For those who haven't met me, I'm Diesel Becker, your Captain. I have gathered you all here so we can work out a plan of action to make the best of our situation.'

Denji interrupted the Captain. 'Assuming we haven't arrived in New Zealand, where are we?'

Diesel looked at the middle aged Japanese man with long blond hair. 'The short answer is, I don't know. According to the charts this Island doesn't exist.' He watched the sea of blank faces, then continued, 'Obviously it does exist and we need to get to know it.'

Herve Andre a man short in stature but big on ideas, a man who took most things seriously, stood up, His prominent eyes stared straight at Diesel. 'Surely our first priority to get off this island and complete our voyage, Captain.'

Diesel eyed the, shorter man, with a squarish face. 'We can't make the Delaware seaworthy, so how do you propose we sail to New Zealand?'

Some of the passengers sniggered, which agitated Herve, triggering his stammer. 'S, So you lot all want to just sit here and do nothing!'

Diesel interrupted, 'It's OK everybody is entitled to their views and we should not judge them. If anybody wishes to build themselves a raft and sail a couple of thousand miles to New Zealand be my guest. But the reality of our situation is that, for now at least, this island is our home and, if we are to survive we must get to know it.'

Herve, unconvinced, said, 'One way or another I intend to complete my voyage, Captain.'

Looking at the others, he said, 'who is with me?'

Nobody responded but that didn't faze him.' He said, 'Suit yourselves but if you want to help me make a raft, don't leave it too late.' With that Herve moved away from the group.

Amaryllis Forester, at five feet eleven was the tallest woman in the group. She dressed like a gypsy, wearing a long floral patterned skirt and a loose blouse. Her many bangles tinkled as she addressed Diesel. 'Captain, you may have been in charge of us on your boat, but you have no authority to make decisions for us on this island. So who made you our spokesperson?'

Diesel looked straight at tall muscular, formidable woman. 'Bloody Hippie,' he thought. Seeing her as a tragic refugee from the distant 70s, he corrected, 'I have no intention of being your boss, as you put it. We have just escaped a dictatorship so it's the last thing we want here.'

Bart Murphy, Now wearing a shirt - a Hawaiian shirt with a hibiscus flower pattern - spoke up.

'Before the skipper got us all together, you were all wandering around in a daze, wondering what to do. He didn't do this to boss us around. The skipper did it so that we can work as a team to make the best of our situation.'

Amaryllis responded, 'That's all very well if you want to replicate the kind of system from which we managed to escape. So what if we don't want to be part of a team? What if we want to fend for ourselves?'

There were some nods of approval from the agitated crowd.'

Diesel sighed, 'Of course you're free to try and survive by yourselves out there,' he said, pointing at the coastal shrubs and stunted sheoaks along the beach. All I'm saying is we're better off if we pool our resources and work together. And that's just common sense.'

The hippie woman said, 'Hands up those who want to do their own thing.'

A couple of castaways tentatively raised their hands. Then a few more followed.

Diesel, relieved there was only a handful, said, 'Does that mean all you other people want us to work together?'

Most of the gathering agreed.

Diesel said, 'Those of you splitting from the main group can leave the meeting now.'

There was some hesitation, then a few survivors exited the gathering.

But Amaryllis said, 'I need to get my belongings from the ship.'

Diesel smiled, 'Of course madam. I will just take a little while to organise.'

'I don't need you to organise anything Captain. I'm quite capable of dealing with it myself.'

The Captain said, 'Now, listen everybody. Let me make my self clear. Nobody steps foot on the Delaware until it is made safe.'

Amaryllis stared daggers at Diesel. 'I will go where I damn well please.' Turning to the people for support, she said, 'So, who is with me?'

'A few people gathered around the wild woman.'

Diesel, losing his patience, said, 'I know the Delaware inside out and even I had difficulty moving about the tilting ship. So you will all have to wait for your stuff until we have worked out a way to make it safer.' He paused, then added, 'And that's my last word on the matter. Except that I will post guards around the ship, so no trying to sneak aboard.' Then, as if an afterthought Diesel said, 'Those of you who want to work as part of a group see Bart Murphy and let him know your skills and strengths. And if there are engineers among you meet me tomorrow morning at dawn and I'll take you out to the ship.'

Amaryllis, still smarting from the Captain's orders, needed to retreat and lick her wounds. She sat looking up at the clouds scudding across the sky, wondering how she came to be stuck on the island. She had been born on a sugar plantation in Villa Clara in Cuba. Her father owned the plantation, which was small by normal standards. So she knew all about hard work. Amaryllis Riya always wore sunshades and long sleeves out in the open. It was not that she had sensitive skin but she definitely had a phobia to do with bright light.

Chapter 4

Godiva Canterbury opted to stay with the group. Going off on her own into the unknown was definitely not her thing. She thought the Captain was naturally bossy but he did make sense and seemed to know what he was doing. Most of the assembled castaways separated to pursue whatever they had been doing, Godiva among them. She smiled to herself as a welcoming cool breeze blew through her shoulder length curly brown hair as she walked back to the small crude lean-to she had constructed, using palm fronds placed over low branches. It was only temporary but it would have to do for now.

It was hot out of the shade The weather had become bright and dry drying the damp sand from the previous night's storm. A few sparse clouds raced across the sky chased by the cool refreshing light wind. She had not bothered to give Bart her qualification details. Mainly because she thought they would serve no use in her present situation. She did have one useful physical quirk. Godiva had super sensitive hearing, which although a normally superficial gift would have some use living among the castaways. Castaways sounded so much more interesting than stranded. Castaway had an adventurous ring to it. Whereas lost or stranded was weak and disempowering. Godiva was disturbed from her musings by the young woman approaching her shady patch under some scrubby sheoaks. She looked up at the younger woman's beautiful almond-shaped eyes. 'Hello,' Godiva greeted simply.

Easter Lowen scanned the stoutly built older woman. 'I saw you sitting here all by yourself. A group of us women are going to look for food. You can join us if you like.'

Godiva stared at Easter's fine brown hair, which was worn in pigtails. 'She thought the woman looked immature. 'I'm sitting here alone because that's my choice. And regarding joining you and your friends for a cooking session, I couldn't think of anything worse.'

It was not the response Easter expected. She responded, 'It's better to remain active than to be idle.' 'Who says I'm being idle,' Godiva snapped. Easter never went out of her way to make friends with anybody and this rude woman was no exception. 'So you expect us to provide you with food and get nothing from you in return.'

Godiva, retorted, 'Doesn't the little women doing the chores while the men go off to fix the boat, have any recollections for you? I find it curious how quickly we take up our old roles, without even being aware of it. We can reinvent ourselves here, if we have a mind to.'

Easter, gearing up for a full on argument got deflated very quickly. She found herself agreeing with Godiva's argument, which she found very persuasive. 'How do we re-invent ourselves with the whole weight of our history behind us?'

'Do I look like a fucking agony aunt?' Godiva snapped, hoping it would get the grown-up schoolgirl off her back. Much to her surprise Easter burst out laughing. When she got over her hysterics, Easter said, 'I think we could become good friends.'

'Heaven forbid,' Godiva responded, looking heavenward.

'I can't stand pretenders but you're fucking real. You just say what you think and I respect that.'

'Good for you, dear,' Godiva said, cynically. Now can you leave me alone.'

Jerry saw a bunch of people further along the beach. Maybe his wife was among them. In desperation he yelled out her name. They both saw each other at the same time and Zoe became animated. The short handsome black man - more coffee coloured really - was walking along the beach towards her. She cried out, 'JERRY! OVER HERE.' She waved her arms for emphasis. They looked each other in the eye, then hugged tightly, completely oblivious to the many pairs of eyes turned in their direction.

'I've been so worried about you,' Zoe said. Where have you been?'

'I don't know, sweetheart. I think I must have been washed up on the shore like a piece of driftwood.'

'Well you're here safe and sound and that's all that really matters,' Zoe smiled.

Jerry looked out at sea at the slanting Delaware. 'It doesn't look like that's going anywhere soon.' Then he said, 'Man, I'm thirsty. Have you got any water?'

Zoe gave him her canteen, which was only a quarter full. Then she introduced Jerry to the group. Bart came up to them with his ledger that recorded the castaways' details. He looked at Jerry. 'What's your name and what skills do you have?'

Jerry looked at the gangly man with a brush cut hair style. 'Before all this shit went down I was with the ACOE.' Seeing the puzzled look on Bart's lean face, Jerry explained, 'The Army Corps of Engineers.'

Murphy brightened, 'Then you'd be the man for the job.'

'What job?'

'The skipper is over there in the old tub trying to work out a way to move around the ship safely.'

Jerry looked at the sky. The sun was turning to blood red as it dipped under the ocean at the horizon.

'It'll probably be best to leave it till morning.'

Bart looked at the Mulatto, frowned a bit, then said, 'Yeah, you're probably right.' he was about to walk away, when he turned back to Jerry. These people have been catching fish and gathering firewood while you've been missing.' He looked at his list. 'Mr Byrne. 'Your contribution tomorrow will make up for it.'

Jerry had dealt with Bart's type before. Bart had been given authority but was unsure about how to apply it. Jerry said, 'Who died and made you king, Mr Murphy?'

Many of the castaways laughed at his remark, making Murphy feel very small.

Diesel and his helpers were back from the reef just before dark. The beach bonfire burned fiercely and the atmosphere was full of nervous tension. The liveliness of the castaways suggested they were on a weekend camping trip, minus the lightweight compact tents. But it looked like being a very long weekend. Especially as Diesel had been sailing under the radar and nobody knew of their or the island's existence. The fire tended to warm the survivor's spirits as well as their bodies but the night turned chilly and the castaways only had the clothes they came ashore with.

Amaryllis Riya took up the cause and approached Diesel. He was sitting on a branch of driftwood near the fire, talking with Bart. 'Excuse me Mr Becker but we have to address the clothing situation.'

Becker turned to look at the hippy woman. He remembered her from earlier in the day. 'I thought you were going to strike out on your own.'

'Not until I get my things from the boat.'

He shrugged, 'Fair enough. You can stay if you like, but we all have to pull together.'

Amaryllis Riya said, 'I'm not here to talk about that.'

He looked at the broad-faced, thin lipped warrior hippie, if that was not a contradiction. 'So, you are the people's champion.'

Bart sniggered, then checked himself.

Amaryllis looked down at the Captain. despite his hooked nose and and slightly lopsided mouth, he held some appeal for her. 'I agree with you Mr Becker.' Calling him Captain or skipper gave him a sense of authority. In her book he was just another castaway. 'And right now we should be pulling together to stop us freezing to death.'

Diesel sighed. 'I'm well aware that this situation we find ourselves in isn't perfect. Well keep the fire going tonight to keep the people warm. Tomorrow we'll get things off the Delaware.'

Amaryllis had expected an argument but Becker was surprisingly accommodating. She turned to go. He said, 'Hippie warrior, you have spunk. We need people like you in this group.'

She had never been called that before and didn't know whether to consider it a compliment or an insult. She shrugged and turned to leave again.

Diesel said, 'we'll need more wood to keep the fire going. Can you organise a team to see to that?'

Amaryllis, who was neither a leader or follower, thought she'd found her niche, that of subordinate overseer. That had been her roll on the Cuban plantation. That was before the sugar industry fell below market expectations for the third year in a row. Jose Riya, Amaryllis's father, joined many other sugar growers who wanted to keep the industry nationalised. But the government was forced to open up the market to foreign investment. The Arnold Government had been putting pressure on Cuba, to open up its sugar market, ostensibly to put life back in it. But Jose and the growers knew

what it really meant. America would finally have control over Cuba. Amaryllis was horrified at the prospect. She found out about the ship taking migrants to New Zealand, on Wetopia. She flew to America on a visitor's visa and booked her passage on the MV Delaware. Which was how she came to be part of this odd bunch of castaways.

Chapter 5

It was around 5 am and the sun was climbing into the sky. The high tide had flooded part of the engine room, making it even more difficult to carry out the necessary work, which was to make walking around the ship safer and easier. Diesel turned to Bart, 'This is going to make it difficult.'

Bart nodded, 'Shall I go and get the army engineer guy?'

Diesel said, 'I wanted to show you something before you bring the others out here.'

Bart, puzzled said, 'What's that?'

Diesel said, 'Follow me.' He climbed carefully through the hole. He immediately felt the water seeping through his boots, making his feet cold and wet. Diesel figured most of the water would flow out when the tide ebbed.

Bart, being taller, finding it more difficult to move around in the cramped conditions, suggested, 'Let's wait until the tide goes out.'

'No. We have to do it now.'

Diesel led Bart up onto the deck. he grabbed a rail to help keep his balance on the sloping surface.

'Where is this thing you want to show me?' Bart said, confused.

Diesel turned to him. 'We have to get into the hold.'

Bart, even more puzzled, said, 'Why? We aren't carrying cargo on this trip.'

Diesel eye-balled his first mate. 'Yes we are and we have to check it before the others start foraging around the ship.' He added, 'It's in the cargo hold.' So we have to get in there ' the Captain said, agitation showing in his voice.

Bart looked at Diesels slightly slanted eyes. 'How come you didn't tell me about any cargo, except our human one.'

'It was a pre-order. When all that shit went down and we had to get the Delaware ready for human habitation it slipped my mind, ' Diesel said, defensively.

'So what have we got in the hold, skipper?'

'The Indonesian order.'

'I thought we'd agreed not to do that shit after they starting checking every vessel leaving port.'

'I told him it was the last one. and he did pay double.' Diesel took a moment. Then he said, 'Our passengers provided the best cover.'

Bart looked at Diesel. What are you going to do about it?'

'Check it's condition. Move it from the hold to somewhere less obvious.' He added, and I need your help for that.'

It would be simpler to leave it where it is and cover it up.'

Diesel mulled it over. 'Right, I'll keep the keys to the hold.'

Bart nodded, 'Are we going to check it then.'

Diesel nodded, 'Yes, but we need to be quick about it.'

They couldn't open the hatch from the deck side. Even if they could have done so the slippery slanting deck made it difficult to reach the hatch cover. But there was a small hatch that allowed inspection of the hold without opening the main hatch doors.

It was tricky with the ladder at an angle but Diesel and Bart got to the bottom. Diesel shone a flashlight into the hold. The cargo had shifted when the Delaware hit the rocky reef. The Captain had covered it with a heavy duty tarp, which had been secured at each corner to stop the cargo sliding and hitting the side of the hold. Diesel noticed some sea water in the corner that couldn't escape. I hope our cargo's not damaged.'

Bart grabbed his skipper's arm. 'If we weren't shipwrecked would you have told me about this cargo?'

Diesel turned to his first mate. 'Of course, 'This,' Diesel said, pointing at the cargo. 'is our nest egg, mate. It's our stake in the future in New Zealand.'

Bart, who was usually trusting, couldn't be 100 percent sure the Captain was being straight with him. But as always he gave Diesel the benefit of the doubt. 'You mean it was to be our stake in the future.'

Diesel grinned, 'Let's go and check it.'

Bart stood agog as he looked upon the weapons before him. 'Jesus, Skip. This shit is state of the art from Mecha Munitions.'

He stared at Diesel. 'And The Indonesian has a buyer lined up?'

Diesel said, 'If we ever get off the island.'

Bart corrected, 'If it is an island.'

'Well, of course it's an island.'

Bart scanned the length of the beach visible to him. If it is it's a big one.'

'We're no where near any large land mass,' Diesel argued.

'How do we know that skip? according to our charts this place does not exist. So how can you be so sure of anything else?'

Diesel, sighed, 'Never mind all that. We have a job to do.'

'Aye, aye Skipper.'

'And lock this hold up tight. Nobody else must know about these weapons.'

Chapter 6

Jerry turned to Zoe, 'I reckon that boat is both a curse and a blessing.'

Looking out to sea at the ship on the rocks, Zoe smiled. 'I know what you mean, love.'

Jerry knew that she could almost read his thoughts at times. It was a bit disturbing to him at first.

But he had kind of gotten used to it. Sometimes he checked just to make sure they were both on the same page. His thoughts could sometimes be interpreted in different ways. Jerry said, 'So, what do I mean?'

Her large expressive black eyes fixed on him. 'It's always out there, goading us, A reminder that we'll never reach our destination.'

Jerry saw Bart approaching them as they sat on the sand.

Bart stopped a few feet away. ' Mr O'Byrne, the Captain needs your help now.'

Jerry looked at Zoe.

She said, 'It's OK. I need to find some shade. My skin is beginning to burn.'

Bart looked at Jerry. 'We need to get moving,' he said with urgency in his voice.

Jerry snapped, 'OK man, don't hassle me.'

Bart explained, 'Looks like another storm coming and the Skipper wants as much shit off the boat as we can handle, before it hits.'

Jerry looked up at the cloudless blue sky. 'Who told you there's a storm is coming?'

'When you've been at sea as long as me you can smell these things.'

Diesel waited by the rowboat agitation showing on his face. As Bart and the engineer arrived,

Diesel said, 'If you're ready Mr Byrne, lets go out to the Delaware.'

'It did not take long to row out to the stricken ship. Bart moored the rowboat to a rusty pole, that had become part of the reef. Diesel showed Jerry the huge gouge in the ship's hull.

Jerry looked at the Captain. 'Just what do you expect me to do?'

'The Delaware's list makes it very difficult to move around. We need a level floor on each of the decks.'

Jerry took a look inside the engine room and soon concluded what the Captain wanted was an impossibility. He stepped out of the jagged hole and said, 'Let's see if there's an easier way to do this.'

Diesel looked at Jerry. 'We've already checked. The only other way to access the ship is to scale the side of the hull, and ...'

Jerry, a straight shooter, said, 'I thought you got me out here because of my engineering expertise.'

'Yeah, that's right,' Diesel said.

'Then let me get on with my job.' Jerry said, straight to the point.

They looked at Jerry but said nothing. Then Diesel, taken aback by Jerry's physical response, which was to clamp his hands to his thighs, said, 'Sure, help yourself.'

Jerry nodded, then indicating the lifeboat he said, 'Why didn't you launch the other lifeboats?'

Diesel said, 'It was too risky during the storm.'

'And what about letting this one down, now.'

Diesel said, 'I'll have to get at it by going through the ship.'

'Is that a problem for you Captain?'

'Not once I'm up on the deck.'

'Then, what are you waiting for?'

Diesel climbed inside the wreck and made his way up to the main deck. He reached the first lifeboat. The Delaware was an old freighter so she didn't have electronic winches. He looked over the side of the ship at Bart and Jerry below. 'WATCH OUT BELOW!' he yelled releasing the the boat from its davits. gravity took over and Diesel lowered the lifeboat manually until it sat on the rocks.

Jerry trod his way over sharp embedded oyster shells to the boat and checked the ropes, which had unwound from the hand winch. Jerry, stocky and muscular from his time in the army, had the upper body strength to scale the side of the hull using one of the ropes. Diesel helped haul himself onto the sloping deck. The Captain needed to assert his authority but he didn't want to clash with the army engineer, whom he needed. 'So he turned his attention to Bart. 'TAKE THE BOAT BACK AND BRING A WORK GANG,'

'AYE, AYE, SKIPPER,' Bart said and headed back to the lifeboat in the water.

Jerry had an idea, He yelled. 'TAKE THE lifeboat TARPAULINS WITH YOU. WE CAN USE THEM FOR SHELTER.'

It was another good idea Diesel had missed. he turned to Jerry. 'OK lets start bringing the supplies up on deck.'

Chapter 7

None of the castaways took much notice of Rachel O'Reilly, until they learnt she was good at spear fishing. She had also been a horse riding champion but that was not as useful as her fishing skills. Rachel had fallen from her horse and sustained a back injury which left her with a slightly crooked spine. She was very much a loner, and she had never craved human company, much preferring her horses instead. She actually deplored most people, seeing them as a blight on the earth. She believed in the need to cull humanity, which had her marked as a Malthusian at heart. She received her first pony as a birthday present when she was 7. Her father, The Earl of Stockton took her on her first fox hunt when she was 10. She never forgot the exciting moment when she had fox blood smeared on her face. She had learned spear fishing while on vacation on the family yacht in Barbados.

Bart was busy transporting supplies from the Delaware so he left Amaryllis Riya in charge of his census list. In contrast to her long dark-coloured skirt, which she had slit up the side to give her freer movement, and her peasant blouse top, Amaryllis wore her fine dark brown hair short. Al thought it emphasised her slightly receding hairline her hair style was much more practical for life on the beach than those passengers with long hair.

Amaryllis scanned Bart's list and found the person she was looking for. Now she just had to find her. Amaryllis put on her best warm, friendly face and asked passengers if they had seen Rachel. She eventually ran the well spoken woman down and found her carving points on wooden spears. Amaryllis said, 'Are you Rachel?'

Rachel continued with her carving. Then she looked up at the tall strong woman. 'Who are you?' 'Amaryllis.'

'Well, you already know my name, so what do you want?'

'I want you to teach people how to catch fish.'

Rachel put her spear aside and stood up. She was almost as tall as Amaryllis. 'And who put you in charge?'

Amaryllis felt like responding in such a rude manner but she knew how to put on a sweet, loving expression. She said, 'I'm merely getting people to share their valuable skills, Rachel.'

Diesel supervised as people carried food supplies that needed no refrigeration, tools, clothing and other useful goods up onto the main deck where other passengers loaded the items into the lifeboat. Jerry and Denji used the hand winches to lower the boat onto the rocks. Bart and two other men finished loading the lifeboat with supplies which Godiva and Todd rowed to the shore.

Al O'Neill, sweating from the exertion of lugging goods along sloping floors and up odd angled ladders, took a short break.

Jerry came up to him. Looking at the plump guy whose clothes seemed too tight for him, He said, 'Tough work, huh!'

Al grinned, 'I don't mind. It's the most physical exercise I've had for ages.'

Jerry handed him a bottle of water. 'Keep your fluids up.'

Al consumed the water in two gulps.

Jerry felt a shift in the weather. The temperature instantly dropped by a few degrees. He looked up looked at the sky. 'I reckon this will be the last load before that storm hits.'

Al stared at the engineer. 'Jeez man I hope we don't have to carry all the stuff below decks again.'

'Look, I got to get back to the winch. Why don't you go and get the Captain to store this stuff in the hold?'

Before Al had chance to find Diesel, the Captain approached him. 'Al, we'd better get the extra stuff stored below.'

'Al, using Jerry's suggestion, countered, 'It would be much easier to put it in the hold for now.'

Diesel stared at Al. 'Just get it stacked one floor down, out of the rain.' As an after thought he added, 'Get any tarps or water proof covers. We're going to need as many as we can get.'

Nariko Osako, Although in her early 70s, and short in stature, was athletically built. She had the tell tale signs of age but a strong heart beat in her breast.

Rachel O'Reilly preferred to go by her maiden name, Fitzwilliam. O'Reilly was so bog Irish she was pleased to ditch the name once she was divorced. She had only used the name O'Reilly to remain anonymous on the voyage. Now, here she was, shipwrecked and teaching people to fish. Rachel looked down at the Japanese woman with a squarish jaw and light blonde hair. Rachel had never seen a blonde Japanese woman before. But she made no mention of it. She handed the woman a spear with a carved point. Rachel did the same to Xavier and Namir Chouhan, who was recovering from his double ordeal. Apart from having to cope with the shipwreck experience he had to make sense of the new world he had inhabited. Rachel scrutinised Xavier and noticed he wore corrective glasses. Addressing Xavier she said, 'Will you be able to see the fish?'

He responded, 'Why shouldn't I see the damned fish, Rachel.'

'Are you short-sighted or long-sighted?' Rachel demanded.

Xavier did not like the pushy woman. 'I'll have you know I'm probably better at spear fishing than you, Rachel.'

Nariko, usually one not to comment, said, 'Excuse me please, can you stop arguing. I am here to learn to fish.'

Namir felt agitated but did not say anything.

Rachel turned to Xavier. 'You are welcome to stay in this group. But if you stay, you'll do it my way. Is that clear?'

Xavier smiled, 'Thanks but no thanks, I'll fish on my own, Rachel.'

'Please yourself,' Rachel said.

Xavier said, 'You're right. I can please myself. Nobody can boss me around in this new world, Rachel.'

'I'm not holding you back,' Rachel huffed.

Namir felt uncomfortable when people argued. he kept poking out his tongue, like a lizard. Although it was not anywhere near as long as reptile tongues. Rachel tried ignoring it. But she was concerned because Namir was like a child and soon he would be holding a deadly weapon. Rachel sighed, her little spear fishing class had not turned out the way she expected.

Chapter 8

Gretchen Magan wished she had her prescription glasses with her. Her near sight was almost perfect. But her long sight was blurred. Somewhere between ship and shore she had lost her spectacles in the ocean and there was no chance of retrieving them. So she had to do things that only required close up vision. Which was why she was collecting coconuts on the beach.

Ulysses Magan turned to Gretchen. 'Admit it, Mom I could be right.'

Gretchen looked up from coconut gathering around the stand of palm trees and gently said, 'Sorry, I'm busy. What were you saying?'

Ulysses grinned, 'Were you collecting coconuts with your ears?'

'Ha, ha, very funny. I'm listening now,' she said, cheerfully.

'OK. What I said was, 'What if all this,' he gestured around him, 'has all been set up? What if were on some island survival programme? The audience is watching us but we can't see them.'

Gretchen brushed her brown hair out of her eyes. 'Oh, come on. We were shipwrecked. the ship is still over there to prove it.'

"That's what they want us to believe. They can manipulate our minds so that we are convinced we're ship-wrecked, when really they have put us in this predicament to see how we cope.'

Gretchen Took her rainbow coloured scarf from around her neck and turned it into a turban to hold her straying locks of wild, chocolate brown hair. She looked at her 17 year old son. 'Oh, you and your conspiracy theories. Why can't you just accept the way it is.'

Ulysses firmed his jaw. 'You can't prove its not a conspiracy set up by some smart games show-reality programmer. can you?'

Gretchen loaded half a dozen coconuts into a shoulder sling, she'd made from the cardigan she was wearing when the ship hit the rocks. 'Of course I can't prove it didn't happen that way, but where's the evidence to say you're right? Where are the cameras filming this for a start?'

Ulysses beamed, 'That's obvious Mum. We're being recorded by a satellite.' Seeing the doubt showing on his mother's face, Ulysses said, 'I'll find the proof. Then you and all these other gullible fools won't be able to deny it.'

'Maybe, Ulysses, but right now we need to take the fruits of our labour back to the main group.'

Back at the main group, people were busily fitting a water proof cover over a basic shelter, built earlier that day by a castaway called Skate Hunter. Skate, an imposing figure, stood 6.4 and wore a sarong with his upper body bare, showing off his well established tan. He was in his 50s and carried excess fat around his tummy. A building site overseer for the last ten years, he easily snapped into that role. Although this building project was on a much smaller scale the principles were the same. So he let his team do most of the heavy work. He was square jawed with a slightly turned up nose and thin lips. He organised a small team to build the shelter. First, he got people to gather drift wood suitable for poles to support the structure. Using a part of a coconut shell for digging he showed one of his team where to dig holes in the sand. Skate sunk the uprights about two feet into the sand. Meanwhile, two of his work gang collected palm fronds. Apart from covering the shelter, leaves from the fronds made effective substitute rope to tie the cross beam to the uprights. Before that, he carved a notch in the top of each upright so the beam sat balanced on top of them, making it easier to tie them together. Skate tied four palm branches to the frame to brace the lean to.

Kiara Huntington, Who had a sweet looking, butter wouldn't melt look about her and one of the builders, asked, 'Skate why are we putting the palm fronds on the shelter when we've got waterproof tarps?'

Skate, fixed his almond shaped eyes on her. 'Have you seen what happens to a tarp when it sags under the weight of water it' has collected?'

Kiara smiled sweetly. 'But surely, if we stretch it out enough it will ...'

Skate tried keeping a cheerful demeanour, but this young woman was testing him. 'Just trust me on this. '20 years in the building trade has shown me we need as much support for the roof as possible.' He added, 'And what we have built may not even be enough, but it's the best we can do.'

Kiara smiled sweetly again but said no more on the subject.

That night, as the castaways gathered around the communal bonfire, Diesel made an announcement. 'Well done people. We've achieved a lot today. While we were out transferring supplies from the Delaware you guys were busy helping to get the camp shipshape.'

Bart handed his skipper a piece of paper. Diesel read it, then said, 'Lets give a big hand to Rachel who got us some fresh fish for dinner. And Skate and his team for erecting the shelter, which is now stacked with supplies. Now, about the food we have stored, it is our emergency supply. Nobody is to take anything without permission. If anybody steals food from our supply they will be punished.'

Xavier Wood challenged, 'Who died and made you God, Mr Becker?'

There was silence as the team spirit quickly dissipated.

Bart jumped to his skipper's aid. 'It's the Captain's guidance that has made all this possible, so don't go ...'

Diesel stopped the first mate in his tracks. 'No, Bart. Let Mr Wood have his say. '

Xavier continued with his complaint. 'I agree that on your boat you are the boss, but not on this island. So I propose we vote to see who we want as our leader, Captain.'

A few campers agreed.

Al O'Neill said, 'I second the proposal.'

Bart scoffed, 'This isn't a fucking AGM.'

'Maybe not but it needs to be democratic.'

Alexei Nobikov, although short and diminutive, spoke up. He had a commanding air about him that made people sit up and listen. 'For some reason we hang onto a notion that democracy solves all our ills. What we need here and now is a meritocracy, in which skills and abilities related to our survival far out way popularity.'

Some of the campers applauded.

Bart snapped, 'So do you want to be our leader, Mr Nobikov?'

Alexei responded. 'I don't make these comments to push myself forward. I think the hunters and builders should be up here announcing their achievements. He turned to Captain Becker. 'Sir, this is not a personal attack but the achievers among us should be speaking of their own achievements. We do not need you or Mr Murphy to be our mouth pieces.'

Major applause this time.

Then the storm hit!

Chapter 9

It was a wild night! The wind blew faster; the rain drove harder as palm trees swayed dangerously, bending against the gale. As the tempest raged coconuts freed from their trees dropped to the sand below. Anybody camped near them was in danger of being hit. The gnarled sheoaks and spiky leafed Pandanus' didn't bend like the palms. They stood rigid against the storm's fury, losing twigs and small branches as the wind ripped through them. The sound of the ocean was deafening as the tempest churned up big waves that crashed on the shore, carrying driftwood, seaweed, and other items, with it. These treasures were snapped up by the castaways in the morning or whenever the storm abated.

High winds, thunder and lightning and the driving rain, battered the castaways as they searched desperately for whatever protection they could find. Many people tried to squeeze in under the main shelter, which seemed to be holding up under the onslaught.

It would have been bad enough sheltered in a secure home. But being exposed to the harsh elements on a beach with no adequate protection was a nightmare. Gale force winds, thunder, lightning and driving rain hit the island with a vengeance. The blackness of night was punctuated with electricity, that momentarily lit up the beach. Soaked, freezing and miserable castaways pushed against the occupants of the main lean-to, the only place where they could at least get refuge from the storm.

They took no notice of the cries, 'We're full up. There is no more room,' as they pushed hard against those who were outside trying to get in. Some twenty refugees forced against the tarp protecting the supplies. People inside, yelled, 'Go away! We can't fit anyone else in.'

Eventually, those remaining outside got the point and headed off to the tree line, where a few people had made crude shelters.

The storm abated sometime during the night. None of the castaways got much sleep, and most were grumpy because of it. Some of the people were also angry for being denied shelter and accusations flew at the morning meeting. Jerry and Zoe were up early scouring the beach for large straight pieces of driftwood thrown up by the storm. They were lucky enough to have been among the first wave of people protected to some degree under the central shelter, which had miraculously stood up to the driving rain and gale force winds and remained intact. Jerry didn't see it as some supernatural event that saved their asses. To believe in miracles, he would have to believe in a miracle maker, and he was a card-carrying atheist. Or he would have been if such a thing existed.

Zoe hummed as she tied some pieces of driftwood together with palm leaves to pull her bundle back to camp. Keeping busy was the only way she could cope with the morning chill that made her lips tremble. Before the storm hit, Zoe foraged, with other castaways, through a heap of clothes on a tarp to find hers. In the mad frenzy, clothes were tossed aside as frantic survivors dug into the pile to rescue what was theirs. Zoe found her leather shoulder bag, which she stuffed with as many necessary items she could fit in it. It broke her heart to leave her clean, fabulous clothes with designer labels. But Zoe overcame her emotional attachment, at least long enough take only those items suited to a castaways life. Zoe was not the only person overcome by tears as they cast aside their precious but no longer necessary belongings. They all had to make hard decisions based on living in survival mode.

Jerry helped his wife tie the pieces of driftwood together. He then secured his collection, and they hauled their loads along the beach, leaving a trail in the damp sand.

Bart was up brewing black coffee over a small campfire. Jerry catching the aroma said, 'That smell's good, Bart. Is there enough for us to have a cup?'

Bart grinned, 'Well there's plenty of coffee but not so much freshwater. We need to go and look for some today.'

Jerry, in a particularly good frame of mind, said, 'Well, count me in. It's about time we started exploring our new world.'

Zoe had been brought up with the adage, clothes maketh man. Many men she'd known, including her partner, simply got dressed, not dressed up. But some men dressed to make a statement. Bart Murphy was one such man. He wore a vividly, floral-patterned shirt-jacket over which he had on a tan leather waistcoat. To be fair to Jerry, was fussy about his headgear. He wore one of the three hats he'd rescued from the mountain of clothes the day before. It was broad-brimmed, lightweight and coloured bright orange. It also had a couple of gull tail feathers tucked into the rainbow coloured hatband. Jerry dress for him, not anybody else. Some people laughed or made disparaging remarks but Jerry missed all that, entirely focused on whatever filled his mind, which, in this case, was the caffeine hit he so sorely craved. As Murphy poured the coffee into three tin mugs rescued from the ship's galley. Jerry, craving for caffeine, took a sip and burned his lip. He set the mug down as more people emerged like disgruntled zombies and gather around the trio, but there were no more mugs or brewed coffee.

The people attracted by the irresistible aroma were sorely disappointed, especially as many were still shivering after their horrendous night.

Herve Andre, a smallish man with an angular face, suffering from lack of caffeine, said, 'So what have we here, a private coffee party?'

Bart, who could be witty at times, responded, 'It looks like we do now. But we need more coffee and cups.' He added, and a bigger brewing pot. You guys get those things from the galley supplies, and I'll happily make up a brew.'

Gretchen Magan was walking on the beach when she saw something that made her curious. People were gathered, like bees around a honey pot and as she could not see them clearly, her curiosity got the better of her. It seemed that some of her fellow castaways were arguing about coffee.

Herve said, 'If we want coffee, let's do as the man says.'

He walked off, and three other people followed.

Jerry and Zoe sat on the beach enjoying their beverage. Well, he was because he always took it black. Zoe took a sip and slightly grimaced, 'I hope there's sugar in the food supplies.'

'We have a lot more to be concerned about than sugar,' He responded.

'That's easy for you to say, Mister.'

'You know what. Living here could be like having a compulsory detox. People could get over all kinds of addictions and afflictions,' Jerry grinned. Sometimes he just said things to make them rhyme.' Zoe sometimes quipped that he made words rhyme for no rhyme or reason. In this instance she was not amused. He'd touched a raw nerve. 'What, like my sugar addiction?' Zoe snapped. Better not go any further down that road Jerry told himself. He said, 'What I mean is that if we're going to stay on this island, we may as well look at the pluses.'

'So you're planning on staying here,' Zoe said, surprised.

He sighed, 'I'm not saying I prefer this to, say, New Zealand, but we might as well make the best of it while we're here. And if it forces us to become more healthy, that's got to be a good thing.'

Zoe changed the topic. Well sort of. 'I overheard a few people saying they were going to a high point of the island and build a fire, just in case a plane flies over.'

'And?' Jerry probed,

'I think we should go and help.'

Jerry, sighed, 'Can't today I'm afraid. I told Bart I'd go with him to look for fresh water.'

Zoe smiled. 'I guess that is important.' She added, 'I'll go without you then.'

Chapter 10

Khalid Ahmadi, stood back straight with knees unlocked, on the sand a few metres from the tide line. His coal-black shoulder-length hair was tightly braided. He had been carrying out his morning exercises for 10 years, since his 32nd birthday. Khalid was of average build with a well-balanced physique. Apart from his physical well being Khalid stayed mentally healthy. He was always setting himself personal targets to reach. Being stranded on the island presented him with a whole range of new challenges. One of which was to find a source of freshwater. He had already signed up for Bart's expedition into the interior. He would join the group once he'd fulfilled his religious devotions to Allah.

Rachel O'Reilly Fitzwilliam wore her ripped black lightweight jeans and a dark gray t-shirt. Her broad-brimmed straw hat finished off the ensemble. Having got the knots out of her shoulder-length milk chocolate hair, Rachel had wound it into a bun which sat under her hat. She waited for her fishing students to show, so she could present her next lesson. Rachel gave herself a mental pat on the back. She thought she was adapting to castaway life well. She had always needed an identity that was well recognised by the connected people. In Hollywood, she had sold top-end real estate to the rich and famous. Here, where ever she was, she was already known of as the fisher woman. Although it was not as grand as being a prestigious Realtor, it gave her a sense of place in the scheme of things.

Nariko and Namir arrived, and another two people joined them. One was Easter Lowen, a sweet-looking girl with a pixie face. She looked much younger than her 34 years. Perhaps because of her beautiful long hair which she wore in pigtails. The other two new recruit were Vlad, a young man in his 20s who had the physique of a bodybuilder. Which was perhaps not surprising as he was a phys-ed teacher back in the states. He was already appraising the petite Easter, whose dark brown almond-shaped eyes had him bewitched.

Rachel looked at her new students. She handed each of them a spear. 'The first lesson on spearfishing is to hold the weapon loosely in your hand. Rachel demonstrated how to do it. Then she turned do Nariko and Namir. 'You two practice what we did yesterday while I help our new

friends. She returned her gaze to Easter. 'Get rid of those bangles. The fish will hear you miles away.'

Easter was very skilled at putting on her 'butter wouldn't melt' look. But she could just as easily switch to her spiteful persona. 'My bracelets are my good luck, charms. So they stay.'

'If they stay, you don't, Rachel snapped.'

Easter folded her arms and glared at her teacher.

Rachel said, 'Your jewellery may well bring you luck, but my lessons will teach you skills. Decide now whether you want me to teach you or not.'

Easter's mind was already looking for ways to pay the bossy woman back for embarrassing her in public. But she switched back to the innocent look and removed all the bracelets.

Vladimir Ruska, the bronzed god, looked on amused as the women fronted up to each other. The gutsy little Easter had him turned on. Vladimir was pleased he was wearing loose legged shorts that didn't give his erection away.

Rachel said, 'Okay, keep practicing holding your spear, while I see how the other's are doing'.

Nariko and Namir seemed to be getting on well together. Namir did not take to strangers easily, but there was something about the Japanese woman that made him feel at ease. Suhana was so relieved that her brother had found something to do that help ground him. He had been so excited telling her about the fish he'd caught. But there was a double bonus for Suhana when he said he liked Nariko because she was very good to him. Suhana had not met the Japanese woman but determined to do so, to explain her brother's problems.

Rachel went over to check on Nariko and Namir. 'She observed the pair, then explained, 'When spearing your prey aim for the base of the skull where the spine connects because it immediately kills the fish and prevents it from suffering.'

'What happens when we just wound the fish by mistake?' Nariko asked.

'If your prey does not die immediately, you must either grab the point of your spear or the fish to stop it flapping.'

Just then, Namir caught a small snapper. It wriggled crazily and nearly twisted off the spear. Rachel grabbed hold of the fish before it got away. She said, Namir, keep practicing what I have taught you and you will soon be able to kill your target instantly.'

Namir grinned. He was very good at practicing. It gave him a sense of order.

Meanwhile, Vladimir was coming on to Easter. He said, 'You seem like a very nice girl.'

'And you seem like a naughty boy,' she replied.

He grinned widely. 'You good, me bad. It is a good balance, I think.'

He didn't impress Easter, but he kind of amused her.

He looked at her broad face with its a straight nose, and full sensuous lips, 'What say we get together after this lesson and have some fun.'

'What sort of fun did you have in mind?' she asked, leading him on.

Before he had time to answer, Rachel was back. She watched as the pair held their spears in a balanced fashion. Then Rachel said, 'When using a pole spear, extend your arm halfway out, so there is room to lengthen your reach at the moment of attack. Once you've established that the fish is within range of the fully released spear, extend your arm and release the spear in one smooth movement, aiming for the head of the fish.'

Skate Hunter caught up with Bart Murphy, Jerry Byrne and a woman called Kiara Huntington. Jerry remembered her from the day before when he was teaching building skills. Skate nudged her in a palsy fashion. 'See, there was no sag.'

Kiara liked older guys, well, confident older guys and she thought in a different place in different circumstances she may well have gone for Jerry. He was Black and solidly built. The man was clean-shaven, even on the island, and that said something about his self-respect.

He had a strong jaw, and that made him mannish in her book. She immediately hated herself. She always sounded off to her girlfriends about how she hated gender stereotyping, and she finds herself doing a Tarzan and Jane number, What was that all about? She wondered.

Skate, usually went around in a sarong and not much else. He thought people who were afraid of getting a little sun were pussies. He was not ashamed of his body, even if it was not perfect. But for the jungle trek, he opted for his old military camo fatigues. For weapons, he had a big razor-sharp knife and a spear he had fashioned that morning. Skate had the most hunting experience, so he took the lead. Compared to Bart, who had done a little reel fishing off a jetty when he was a teenager, that being the extent of his hunting prowess.

They were about to head off when Khalid Ahmadi arrived.

Skate looked at the olive skinned man with dark brown eyes and a slightly large nose. 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

'I want to join your water seeking group. Oh, and I am Khalid,'

Bart, who had no racial bias and avoided politics whenever possible. He was not caught up in Arabs under the beds propaganda spewed out by the Arnold government. He smiled and said, 'Welcome Khalid.' and with that, the small group set off on a journey into the unknown.

Chapter 11

Zoe thought it was some cruel twist of fate that she had inherited the sunburn genes from her mother's side of the family. Other people flaunted their nearly naked bodies and gradually built up a tan with no burning. She, on the other hand, had to keep covered up or suffer later. So she wore long sleeved, long dresses and wore a scarf around her head. The refuge, as the supply shelter became known, seemed to be the default meeting place for groups to assemble before carrying out specific projects.

Amaryllis stood guard at the refuge, where she kept a record of who was doing what. It was not the sort of role she would generally take on but being tall and sturdy, she could be quite intimidating. But you didn't send a mouse to do a lion's work. Amaryllis tended to be focused and optimistic in anything she took on. Besides, she could sit in the shade and read the epic drama novel she had with her. She bookmarked her page as Zoe approached. She smiled at the overdressed woman. 'Can I help you?'

'Yes, I'm looking for the team making the bonfire.'

Amaryllis, being helpful, looked at the activities list, then up at Zoe. 'Godiva is meeting her people here in - she looked at her watch, ten minutes.' She added come in the shade for a while.

Zoe did so.

The Chief of Security, for want of a less official title, said, 'So why do you want to be on the fire signal detail?'

Zoe, who felt a buzz of satisfaction by helping others shrugged, 'I don't know, but I need to be useful doing something to help.'

'Do you think it will help?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, let's say a plane spots us. Then what?'

Zoe shrugged again. 'I guess the pilot will pass the info onto the coast guard and maybe they'll come and rescue us.'

'Who's going to rescue us, and how?' When people started a sentence with I guess Amaryllis knew they didn't know shit about the subject. And Amaryllis didn't generally give sloppy people the time of day.

Zoe, changed the subject. 'I didn't take you to be part of the ruling system. How did you come to get this job?'

Amaryllis smiled. 'Well, it wasn't our over officious Captain bossy pants. But Bart is really nice, and I'm helping him out.'

Just then Godiva and two other people turned up.

Skate wondered what he was doing on the island? He knew that he was trekking into the interior with three other people. That much was obvious. But in the big picture, why had he given up his security back home to travel to New Zealand? He knew he was going there to challenge an inheritance that was in his sister's favour. But why bother? He had a secure job as a Realtor in

Traverse City. The term city may be a little Grandiose as it had a population of only 15 thousand people. But it was still enough to give Skate a decent living. Besides, most folks wanted to deal with well trusted local people, not a branch of a national organisation that did not know the needs of the locals. But something kept nagging at him. A tiny voice at the back of his mind, telling him to get out of there. Skate did not believe in "conspiracy theories" but he kept hearing rumours about cherry farmers, for whom the city was famous, being forced to leave the land because they could not compete with Chinese cherry imports. To make matters worse, the Arnold Government made it easier for the Chinese to flood the American market. And he had a bad feeling that Hunter Homes for sale and rent, was going to take a downturn.

Kiara's earthy coloured clothes had seen better days, but they were practical, comfortable, and she liked to keep them. Besides, she thought they provided better camouflage in the jungle than Skate's military gear. Being a fitness freak, she easily kept up with the three men. Kiara loved extreme sports, especially bungee jumping and white water rafting, which she did back in the US whenever she had the chance. Kiara felt exhilarated rafting between walls stretching 1200 feet into the sky, through a canyon only 26 feet wide. The thrill of splashing down rapids got her heart racing. The Arnold administration brought out a bill, restricting many extreme sports. The Bill made provision to exempt insurance companies from being liable for personal injuries that occurred in such competitive sports. By the time Kiara was already a signed up member of Wetopia. Through which, she heard about the ship sailing illegally to NZ, where the extreme sports were encouraged as tourist attractions. As it happened, it was a wise move because the Arnold Government brought in ever stricter laws to take away citizen rights under the guise of national security.

After an hour into their grand adventure, Skate gathered his people around him. 'Our mission is to find a source of freshwater. Once we discover it, we return to camp to tell the others.'

Jerry, usually optimistic when faced with challenges, said, 'What if we don't find any? How far are we going to go before giving up?'

Kiara added, 'Even if we do find water, how do we transport it back to the camp?'

Skate smiled warmly. 'They're both good questions and I don't have any ready answers. But I have an odd sort of skill that might just help us in this situation.'

Bart said, 'What skill would that be?'

'I have an ultra-sensitive hearing. I can hear the movement of water from miles away.'

Kiara said, 'That's kinda cool.'

Skate looked at his people. 'So what I'm thinking is, if I don't hear any water after a couple of hours, we turn back.'

Bart removed his floppy cloth hat and scratched his short hair. 'Is two hours going to be enough?'

Skate shrugged, 'We just have to make a group decision about this and stick to it.'

Jerry said, 'We don't want to get stuck out here in the dark.' He wondered where his pessimism was coming from.

'That's right,' Skate agreed, 'so I figure we've got around five hours before sunset.'

Khalid, who had remained silent so far, said, 'If we don't go soon we will not have enough time to walk for two hours and back. So let us agree and get moving.'

Godiva led her team, each member loaded up with pieces of driftwood tied in bundles and carried on their backs. At first, the walk was pleasant enough. They left the beach, pandanus, sheoaks and coconut palms behind. They wended their way through coastal grassy woodlands, abundant with rough-barked apple and forest red gum. Godiva ploughed on ahead with her team trying to keep up with her pace. The day was turning a little cooler with a mild refreshing breeze. Even that didn't stop the group feeling hot and sweaty. Zoe's bundle of wood became increasingly more burdensome. Carrying the package was easy for the tall, tanned Jasoslava who, with plenty of energy to spare, had powered onward ahead of Zoe. Young, fit Ulysses who at seventeen was full of testosterone and bravado, easily kept up with Jasoslava. Zoe, usually compliant with others' decisions did not complain, but in this case, she felt she had to say something. Godiva was a little power pack, focused on her goal. Using the end of a fallen gum tree branch, she fashioned a rude

staff. This gave Zoe a chance to catch up to the rest of the group. She took a pull on her water canteen.

Godiva said, 'Take it easy with the water, Zoe, you've got to make it last.'

'It would be a lot easier without having to carry the fucking wood,' Zoe complained.

Ulysses, thinking he would score points for gallantry, glanced at the young Russian woman, and said, 'Zoe if it's too much for you I can carry your bundle.'

Zoe saw through his ploy but if his gallantry made it easier for her she did not care if it was for Jasoslava's benefit, not hers.

He was obviously trying to impress the beautiful young woman.

The Russian girl thought men were generally jerks. She quickly saw through the handsome young man's bravado and was unimpressed.

Godiva, with only one thing on her mind – to get to the headland and build the bonfire, said, 'I don't care who carries the bundle as long as you don't hold me up. Now let's keep moving.'

Zoe handed over her bundle to Ulysses, who found it no trouble at all.

It was much more easy going for Zoe, but the selfless aspect of her nature made her feel she wasn't pulling her weight. She couldn't really see the reason for taking the driftwood with them. They were going up to a headland. Surely there would be trees and fallen branches up there? If so, this Godiva character is going to look pretty stupid, and that would help Zoe alleviate her guilt.

Alexei Nobikov had worked as a newspaper reporter for the Des Moines Chronicle for 15 years when he decided to leave America. He had seen Mid west's fastest-growing city transformed from the ugly duckling into the beautiful swan of fable Lore. Alexei was witness to the transformation of Des Moines. He experienced seeing "Dull Moines" elevated into one of the most dynamic, vibrant, hippest cities in the United States, and he had reported on it every step of the way. Alexei, the son of a migrant family from Estonia, had made Iowa his home. He became a cub reporter when he left school and in fifteen years with the paper had become the Editor in chief of the publication. Then everything turned sour, and Alexei had to leave the country. But that was a story for another day. Right now Alexei was a shipwreck survivor on a remote island.

Alexei tended to be a loner, and he preferred it that way. In many respects, he had already been a loner, even while living in Des Moines. Apart from mixing with colleagues at work, Alexei was no social animal. Many people found him uninteresting because he showed no self-interest and seldom if ever made political or religious comments. Alexei found most people's conversations boring and avoided them when at all possible. Yet, at work, he seemed like an entirely different person, a social networker, enthusiastic and passionate about his city.

As a passenger on the MV Delaware, Alexei hardly spoke to his fellow escapees. While many passengers shared stories about how they got to be on the boat Alexei said nothing about it at all. Alexei decided to look for a source of freshwater himself. He lived his life unencumbered by the petty squabbles of committee members. Alexei loved spontaneity and couldn't be bothered waiting for groups to get their act together. He had a motto "Follow the Magic". To Alexei, nature was magic. But the magic didn't wait for people to make joint decisions. So he went off to find water by searching for a creek outlet somewhere further along the beach.

Despite being short in stature, Alexei exuded a sense of dominance that put his friends off getting into any deep and meaningful conversations with him. He had not even remembered much about his early life in Estonia. He vaguely remembered his father taking him to Lahemaa, the most significant and oldest national park in Estonia. Young Alexei recalled those trips in particular because that's where his dad had toughened him up. Even when Alexei's legs felt like jelly, his dad pushed him further. But once they reached the picturesque rivers, lakes and waterfalls, it all seemed worth it. Later in America, as an orienteering park guide, Alexei took groups of visitors into Ashton Wildwood National Park. But many complaints from tourists about him pushing them too hard got him fired.

When Godiva and her little group reached the headland, they just stood and gaped. The view that stretched for miles in either direction took their collective breath away. But most surprising of all

was a high mountain in the distance. It towered above the surrounding hills, dominating the landscape.

Godiva, the first to speak, said, 'Bloody magnificent.'

Zoe said, 'It's one hell of a big island.'

Ulysses, suitably impressed said, 'Cool man.'

The headland, an area of long grass and wind-shaped, stunted thorn bushes was punctuated by the occasional pandanus, which seemed in danger of falling over eroded cliffs. Godiva, an amateur botanist, said, 'There's an unfounded but popular myth that this tree can literally walk around (more or less).'

Jasoslava, having heard this from an ex-boyfriend, responded. 'Why do you say it's a myth?'

Godiva studied the young woman with her small dark brown eyes. It's a quaint idea that its unique root system gives it the appearance of many little legs that help it move away from danger and into the shade. But it's never been proven.'

Zoe, usually patient and selfless, could also be unpredictable in her reaction. She snapped, 'I don't give a fuck about whether the tree can walk or not. When are we actually going to build this fire?'

Ulysses grinned, 'Yeah, I came here to make the fire, not get a botany lesson.'

Zoe forced a smile. 'What's the hurry? We're not being rescued any time soon.'

Ulysses dumped the two driftwood bundles on the ground. Looking about him he could only see small, thin pieces of branch and twigs among the bushes. 'Good job we brought some wood for the fire.'

Zoe was glad she'd kept her theory to herself. But now she felt guilty about not pulling her weight.

So, to make up for it, she began exploring the headland for more fire fuel.

Skate looked at his watch. Another hour and they would have to return to camp. He listened intently, but there were no signs of flowing water. They had walked, more or less, in a straight line up from the beach. Skate wondered if that was the best approach? From a practical standpoint, it would make it easier for the explorers to get back to their beach camp.

Kiara, being a nice person, generally speaking, never set out to hurt or criticise anybody. But she still harboured certain prejudices by default. This was mainly due to the propaganda mill pushed by the biased western media to justify invading Arabic countries for oil. Kiara, like most other gullible people, fell for the War on Terror hype. So, Kiara, felt uncomfortable communing with Muslims. So she was wary of Khalid. Kiara had never had any personal dealings with Islamic people. Still, there was something about them - men mainly - that spoke of a superiority complex and dark mystery.

Khalid, for his part, felt odd in the presence of infidel woman, and Kiara came in that category.

Despite the fact, he had no idea about her spiritual beliefs, for him, her clothing said it all. Kiara was dressed in old, what he termed, inappropriate clothing, namely a revealing torn dress in earthy colours. The small rip under her left breast was held together with a safety pin. What offended Khalid most was loose the movement of her breasts under her low bust line.

Skate, focused wholly on listening for water, missed the whole no verbal interplay between Kiara and Khalid.

Jerry, always highly observant in unusual situations, picked up on the silent judgement that created a stalemate between the two castaways. It didn't take a genius to figure out the reason for the prejudices. Western society had long demonised Islam in the minds of the ignorant masses. And a few Jihadists had committed atrocities to justify that view. But, in Jerry's opinion, It should not have contaminated the Island. Here, they were all in the same boat. Jerry chuckled to himself at his unintended pun. Well, they were in the ship until it got stuck on the rocks.

Chapter 12

As Alexei walked along the beach listening to the rhythm of the waves; attuning his in and out-breath to them as they rolled ebb and flowed on the shore, he felt quite blissful. He was following his magic, and all was good with his world. The reporter came to large smooth basalt boulders ahead and had to take a detour up a sand dune to clumps of long grass that grew out of the sand. He removed his straw hat to scratch his itchy skull. He could not handle his hair long. He had fine hair,

challenging to manage, especially in the wind. He was pleased he kept it short and out of the way. To him the short detour was still natural magic - just different. Alexei had a sensitive nose that picked up the scents of sweet-smelling flowers. He loved the way nature worked. For Alexei, the real magic of the dunes lie in the relationship between creatures that adapted to life in the sand and the dune vegetation that paid back the favour by protecting the dunes from damage. This was a revelatory moment for Alexei. To survive on the island, he had to learn how to live by the Island's rules. In return, he would respect every creature and plant he came across despite him not being a part of their Eco-system. As Alexei sat, he caught a glimpse of a sand snake that burrowed rapidly in the sand. Small beetles scurried away. He even saw sand moths, crickets and spiders that read him as a threat and made themselves scarce. Alexei felt blessed, realising he would not have seen them had he climbed over the rocks. Seeing his little detour as part of the journey was another revelation for the castaway. But what he saw next really blew him away.

Alexei, back on the beach, came to an area of sand in around two inches of water that trickled down to the ocean along a very shallow channel. The water seemed to be coming from under the dune, and he wondered if it was coming from an underground creek. Alexei had heard of such things but had never actually seen one. This being the case he figured that by crossing the dune, there might be a stream running out from a lake or river. Animated, the short Estonian set off up the sloping sand dune and down the other side, which took him into beach scrub, dependent on the level of exposure to external factors, such as salt-laden winds. Alexei was a little disappointed because there was no sign of any watercourse that connected with the ocean. The journalist wasn't about to give up, though. Orienting himself, Alexei continued on his individual quest. He passed under the high up canopies of rain forest trees, including Burdekin plum, bottle trees and scaly ash. Then The reporter saw the precious stream, glinting in the dappled sunlight. It flowed along a narrow winding channel between brown Tulip oaks, Then he saw something even more incredible! Alexei thought he was seeing things. There before him, some twenty to thirty metres away, a humanoid shape, in the shadow of the trees, stood looking straight at him. Alexei froze to the spot. He couldn't comprehend what his eyes were telling him. It must have been around six feet tall. It had glowing orange eyes and the creature looked as though it was holding crude club. Then it turned tail and thundered off, swallowed up by the rain forest, leaving Alexei in a state of suspended belief.

It was not merely a downturn in the property market that made Skate opt for a new life in New Zealand. Personal entanglements also played a large part. Clarice, Skate's partner in business and bed, of fifteen years, found out he was having an affair. It had been going on for some time, right under her nose and Clarice had not picked up on it. Why should she? In all the time she had known Skate, she never had an inkling that he liked other men. Paul Gracely had been Skate's business partner for twelve years. Now Clarice understood all those business conferences Paul and her partner attended. Clarice felt foolish for not picking up on any subtle signals. In the end, Clarice had to confront Skate about his infidelity. It sounded so much better than How long had he been screwing Paul? When confronted about his gayness Skate maintained he was bi-sexual, not gay. Clarice could attest to that because there had never been any problems in the bedroom department. But she could not get her head around being betrayed by Paul Gracely, who came over as a "man's man", but not in the sexual sense.

Traverse City was modern in many respects, but the city fathers' tolerance in the Chamber of commerce had its bounds. When it became known that two of its prominent businessmen were in a gay relationship, the mostly Christian community shunned them and took their business elsewhere. Clarice had not intended to go public, but Skate's refusal to curtail his bi-sexual affair forced her hand.

Despite Skate having been successful in the real estate business, he had always had to fight his pessimism. But now he had lost his business, his church and Clarice he never saw any chance of things improving for him. Now, he had even failed to sniff out water.

Ulysses and Jasoslava had done an excellent job of gathering firewood, while Zoe stacked the bonfire. In normal circumstances, Godiva avoided people from other races. And here she was working with Ulysses Magan and Jasoslava Ruska. He came from somewhere in South America, and she came from one of those places with a name ending in stan. That was all she needed to know about them. Godiva was not a racist. She just thought people should stick to their own countries of birth. Some people would see that as racism but not Godiva.

Jaso and Ulysses shared personal information as they gathered the fire fuel. After Ulysses opened up to the tall, dark-haired girl, she began to let her guard down. He told her his parents came from Haiti, but he was born in Florida. Young Ulysses learnt his parents, who already lived in abject poverty in Haiti, also had to put up with frequent natural disasters. But Enrico was young and fit and with a heart full of hope. Haiti was unbearable, and Florida beckoned. So Enrico found a ship bound for the United States and got a job as a deckhand. He met and married Gretchen, who came from Germany, and she gave birth to Ulysses, whose mixture of genes gave him coffee-coloured skin.

Ulysses' father, Enrico, had worked for a construction company for many years. The Arnold Government came into power with an election pledge to get rid of all non-green card holders living in the States. Ulysses' father was caught up in the first wave of militarised arrests. Gretchen, Ulysses' mother, never heard from him since. His mother, who followed Wetopia on social media found out about the ship going to New Zealand, and that's how they ended up on the island. The fire was ready. Now the problem was how to light it.

Jaso said, 'We will have to be quick to set it on fire. so how do we light it when we see a ship?'

Godiva suggested, 'We need a fast runner to rush up here and light it.'

Ulysses commented, 'Maybe we need to take turns to be up here?'

Godiva's curly brown hair waved as she shook her head, 'Apart from being boring to whoever pulled that duty it would be a waste of manpower.'

Zoe, who had not said much at all about their mission, said, 'What if someone fired a flaming arrow into the firewood?'

'This is not some Viking saga,' Godiva huffed.

Zoe, usually compliant but sometimes melodramatic, said, 'I think this is a total waste of time. Who do you think is going to see us?'

Ulysses said, 'We can always have a party. Light the fire and let off a few flares.'

Godiva, becoming excitable, snapped, 'This is no joking matter!'

Zoe, who looked at most things from a practical viewpoint challenged, 'OK, Godiva, let's say for argument that a plane spots us. And let's say a ship arrived to take us off the island. What will they do with us?'

'Take us to a safe place.'

'May I remind you why we went on the fucking ship in the first place, Zoe, retorted brusquely.

'To avoid being sent to a detention camp,' Godiva stated. She saw Zoe's point. Anybody who rescued them would not risk America's wrath against them and would most likely hand over the shipwrecked dissidents to the American authorities. But Godiva could not afford to lose face in front of the young pair. She said, 'Not if the rescue ship came from New Zealand.'

Zoe threw up her hands in mock surrender. She could see that Godiva needed to score some brownie points, but she was not ready to conceive every aspect. 'I still don't know how we can light this fire in time.'

Jas spoke up, 'Maybe we light the fire and keep it burning.'

Zoe argued, 'It would take an awful lot of wood.'

'And we'd have to keep hauling it up here.'

Ulysses added,

'It is rather impractical.' Godiva said.

Zoe looked to the west. The sun was beginning to turn the sky blood red. 'We need to get back to camp,' she said, changing the volatile subject.

What with Khalid and Kiara avoiding each other and Skate in a dark space, Jerry kept his council and let them all wallow to their heart's discontent. Jerry, like Skate, also generally had a pessimistic outlook. But he tried to combat his depressive view with the motto "The best is yet to come". So what if they could not find water today. He would try again tomorrow, the next day and so on until he finally found fresh water. After all, the alternative was not worth thinking about. So he walked with his teammates in stony silence as they made their way back to the beach camp.

Godiva Canterbury decided to come clean. She would give Bart a couple of her skills to add to his list. Godiva had not mentioned she used to serve as a Judge. She was finished with her judicial career before she signed up for the voyage. So she told him about her botanical interest and her plant painting hobby. These past-times seemed a bit silly to Godiva in her current castaway situation, especially as she had no paint or canvases with her. But Bart was happy to list these skills against her name. Godiva did bring her coloured pencils and a sketch pad with her but they were back in her cabin on the Delaware. She needed to retrieve them so she could make simple sketches to keep as a record of her stay on the island. Godiva referred to being shipwrecked as a temporary inconvenience as a way to keep her spirits up.

Chapter 13

Alexei Nobikov, the investigative journalist, had the best story ever but had no one with whom to share it. Besides, he could have been imagining it. But the reporter did not think so. He had not touched any alcohol since being shipwrecked so he couldn't blame it on the booze. He hadn't smoked any weed either, so it couldn't have been a hallucination. Which meant he either had to accept that the apparition was real, or the sun had gotten to him and he saw a mirage. Alexei always carried a digital camera with him, and it still held a charge. But he would have to find the strange creature and get close enough to record corroborating evidence on his camera. So, Alexei went to the spot where the scary apparition had stared at him, with its eerie orange eyes. He stepped over the narrow creek and looked around the area for any clues that confirmed the creature's presence. As Alexei didn't know what he was looking for, he decided to stick to his original plan and follow the stream to find its source. He found the trail rough going and wished he had a machete with him. Alexei had to duck under low lying branches while trying not to stand on saplings in the under story that given time, would grow up to the canopy level. His path took him past many huge trees that grew above the general canopy level. They had very long trunks, many of which splayed out into a wide-spreading root system.

As the forest canopy became denser, Alexei felt the intense humidity. For the 'umpteenth time He wiped at his sweating brow, but his only handkerchief was now soaked with perspiration. All he could do was rinse out his kerchief in the little stream and dab himself with the cold water. The flow was not getting any bigger, which made Alexei think the trickle came either from an underground spring or a more significant body of water - possibly a lake. He sighed. All he could do was continue following the stream and see where it led.

Diesel Becker, having retrieved his Captain's hat from the clothes pile felt much more at home in his leadership role. Despite the initial unrest caused by challenges to his position, nobody had actually come forward to ask for the task. Not even that Amaryllis hippie women. So Diesel accepted the job and went about it as best he could. But right now he was playing chess against Bart Murphy. The board was a little dog-eared and a pebble took the place of a missing black pawn. Ten minutes had passed, and Bart winced occasionally but still had not made his move. The first mate did not usually take that much time. Diesel cracked his knuckles and said, 'I know when you've got something on your mind. Your old shoulder injury flares up. So what is it?'

'It's probably nothing.'

'OK, so tell me.'

'One of the women put her name down as Beth Aguilar. She didn't list any skills.'

'I still don't get the problem.'

Bart said, 'There is no one of her name listed in the passenger manifest.'

Diesel cracked his neck, his way of relieving tension. 'So go and ask her.'

'I would, but I don't know who signed that name.'

'Maybe ask your hippie friend. She might know.'

Bart, who had warmed towards Amaryllis, defended, 'She's not bad. You two ought to make up and be friends.'

Diesel ignored the comment. He said, 'Remember what we said when we came up with the idea for this voyage.'

We said a lot of things.'

'We knew passengers would be coming from all over. We knew they'd have their own stories and reason for being on board. And we said we would not question them beyond getting basic information. Just because we are on an island and not the old girl trapped out there, I think the same rules should apply.'

Bart nodded. 'So we just let it go then.'

'I think doing nothing is the best plan of action here. Now, are you ready to make your move.'

Diesel and Bart were so intent on their game, they were unaware of Amaryllis' presence.

'Excuse me,' she said, interrupting the chess game.

Diesel looked up at the tall, pale-skinned hippie woman. She reminded him of one of Wagner's Valkyrie, minus the horned helmet. 'Yes, what do you want?'

Amaryllis looked down at the Captain. 'Skate and his people have returned.'

The Captain rose to his feet. 'Were they successful?'

The woman shrugged, 'He wants to speak with you before he tells the others.'

Diesel turned to go when Amaryllis said, 'The Estonian guy - I think his name is Alexei, wasn't with them.'

The Captain looked at the hippie woman. 'So?'

'This morning he said he was going looking for water. So I assumed ...'

'People are free to come and go as they please. But if they don't inform us before they go, they're on their own.'

'I just thought I'd mention it.'

This was not the pushy Hippie warrior woman he saw Amaryllis to be. Unlike the psychedelic flower people of the 70s she was not at all colourful in her dress. She looked as though she was going to a funeral. But her long black backless dress suggested she wore little else under it. For a 50 plus woman, she looked to be in good shape. Diesel hated to admit it to himself, but the broad-faced, woman with hazel eyes turned him on. He had to stay focused. He turned to Bart, 'You go with her. I'll be along shortly.'

Diesel took out a notebook which had a chessboard on each page, on which he did a rough layout showing where the pieces were on the board. He tipped the bits off the board into a wooden box, folded up the board and placed it and the note together in the box. This he buried in the sand near a bent over coconut palm. It was unnecessary but, for Diesel, it added a bit of mystery to the game.'

Skate knew his fellow castaways would be disappointed with the news. Again bare-chested and wearing a colourful sarong, Skate felt more at home. His friendly disposition had helped him in closing sales back in Traverse City. He could be a charmer when it was needed. Now he had to get people to trust him, starting with Captain Becker.

Diesel glimpsed disappointment on Skate's face before the big guy had a chance to cover it up.

As soon as Skate saw Diesel, he quickly changed to his trust me look.

'So, how did it go?'

Skate took Diesel aside. 'We ran out of time. We need to start early tomorrow and camp overnight if necessary.'

'How do we know there is freshwater here?' Diesel said.

'If there isn't we're all fucked! So looking for it is the most important thing we can do.'

Diesel, well aware of the soon-to-be critical situation, responded, 'We'll have to put our people on water rations.'

Skate smiled, 'There has to be freshwater. The rainwater has to go somewhere.'

'It soaks into the ground,'

'Apart from that.' Skate eye-balled the Skipper. 'We're not in a fucking desert. So some land form has to collect the rainwater.'

'Well, let's hope your theory is right.'

Diesel and Skate rejoined Bart and a circle of castaways waiting to hear the news.

Diesel addressed the people. 'Skate has reported that he and his team have not as yet discovered a source of fresh water. So tomorrow, he is taking a group to go further inland. This is a huge island, and we are confident that we will find water.'

Xavier spoke up. 'Is that theory good science or just wishful thinking, Captain?'

Diesel was about to respond when Godiva interrupted. 'I know we haven't given our report, but from the headland, we saw a huge mountain.'

Diesel looked at the short, stocky woman. 'That's useful info but what does it have to do with finding freshwater supplies?'

Godiva walked up to the Captain, who reminded her of an alert hawk. She squared up to him.

'Captain Becker, I attended home school, but even I, with little formal education, remember learning about the water cycle. Mountains interrupt the movement of rain clouds and the water flowing down the mountain, has to go somewhere. To find the mountain and the water won't be far away.'

Diesel was impressed. He turned to Skate. 'Do you agree with Godiva?'

Skate looked at the woman with shoulder-length brown curly locks. 'Take me up to the headland tomorrow, and we can head off from there.'

Jasoslava and Ulysses stole some time together away from the fire. They were bored with the bickering and escaped to the tree line where they sat together on a fallen tree trunk. She reminded him of a skinny 70's model, complete with a plastic Mary Quant cap, like those he had seen in old magazines. He looked at the tall Raven-haired beauty, 'What do you miss most?'

She thought about it as she looked up at the stars. 'WiFi, obviously.'

'Yes, but I was thinking of something more personal.'

'Like what?'

'Well, for me, I miss skateboarding, Hanging out with my mates, partying, the usual shit.'

Jas hugged her black retro parka to her. 'It's weird how it gets so cold at night.'

He moved in a little closer, 'I can keep you warm.'

'Oh, can you now?' she said, not knowing how much to trust him.

He grinned, 'It's probably the best offer you'll get on this island.'

Jasoslava, prone to be a risk taker, responded, with caution. 'Ulysses, you're probably a really nice guy, but.'

She was getting far too serious for him. 'I wouldn't go that far but as for eligible young bachelors go around here, I'm probably your best bet.'

Jas laughed, 'Don't you think a marriage proposal is a bit premature.'

'Jesus. Is that what I was doing?'

Jas yawned, 'Time for sleep, I think. She leant over and kissed him lightly on his cheek. Then she left him sitting alone.'

Chapter 14

William Mosley, if that was his name, followed his usual routine. William Mosley figured it had to be his name because it was printed on the badge of his white lab coat. Not that it mattered, because he was the only one left. He followed the sequence of events every day and had done so, since the others left the Island, saying they would return. 15 years had passed, and nobody had come back. Except for the castaways, if that rumour was true. And Sakko had never let William down. If Sakko's info was correct and there was a group of shipwrecked campers on Izzania, William needed to find out about them. William Mosley, Doctor Mosley to be precise, although he had long forgotten his scientific contribution to the project, was now merely the keeper of the Hairy Apelions. At the last count, there were thirty! And William had to let them see he was their boss. One thing William did as part of his daily routine was to phone David and give an up-to-date report on the experiment. For the first few months, David passed on information to and from Staxis. But

when William told his contact the trial was out of control, David passed on that William was to shield the project. William realised they were telling him to isolate himself and the Hairy Apelions from the world by making the island invisible to shipping that came in too close. But in all the years William had been on Izzania, no ship had gotten close enough to get cut open on Cutter Reef before now. So, on this occasion, once his everyday tasks were completed William determined to find out about the castaways for himself. He was looking forward to working on his cupboard, but that would have to wait.

Kiara Huntington thought it interesting how people in the group gravitated to certain people types. Kiara talked about this with Phoebe Witherstone, as they sat on a large piece of driftwood, from where they could observe the great fiery red orb of the sun set from behind the trees.

Phoebe studied the pretty, athletic, well-tanned woman. But Phoebe wasn't interested in the physical body as much as she was in Kiara's energy, which she claimed she could see and feel.

Kiara had heard of Auras around people but that was as far as her knowledge, or interest went. So Phoebe, being sensitive, just made silent observations. The psychic kept on topic. 'There are many reasons for such human behaviour, some obvious, others more subtle. It has to do with the fact that we all want to be heard and understood at some level. Some people will befriend those who have some of the same belief systems.'

Kiara wriggled her toes in the sand. 'Yes, but we gravitate to those people before we know about their beliefs. So what attracts us to them in the first place?'

'Instinct, intuition,' Phoebe shrugged. 'Whatever it is it provides us with companionship, and who knows, maybe even love.'

Kiara sniffled and said, 'I guess it must be tough for Khalid, then.'

'What makes you think he has no friends here?'

The pretty girl looked at the older woman. 'He's a Muslim.'

Phoebe responded, 'I believe we should treat each other equally.' Then she said, 'Have you actually spoken to Khalid?'

'I was in a group with him looking for water yesterday. I picked up a peculiar vibe from him.'

'And what sort of energy were you putting out, Kiara?'

Kiara didn't know much about putting out vibes, but she was intrigued. Phoebe, although a bit odd, made sense to her. For her part, Phoebe liked the younger woman. But she wasn't ready to tell her secret. To this end, the psychic hid her elitist upbringing very effectively. With her cropped hairstyle, nose and eyebrow ring, and an assortment of tattoos, nobody took her for the spoilt rich kid she was.

As the castaways sat around the fire eating their fish and fish supper, Phoebe, wearing a custom made short jacket over her long gray skirt, addressed the group for the first time. 'I love sitting here with all of you making the best of a difficult situation. Yet I don't even know your names. I think it would be good if we sat around in a circle and, one at a time, tell us your name and one thing you like and one thing you dislike.'

'Why?' Xavier challenged. 'Just because you want to get touchy feely it doesn't mean we all do. I got over that shit 30 years ago, Phoebe.'

Bart, seeing the crestfallen look on Phoebe's face, said, 'OK, let's take a vote.'

Diesel stepped in. He thought the voting process just created division between ideologies. He said, 'Rather than taking a vote, all those people who want to get to join together in a circle organise it with Phoebe. Those who don't, do nothing.'

Bart felt that the Captain had stolen his thunder, but he was thick skinned. He could see the skipper's point.

Somebody said 'That's not very democratic.'

Diesel said, 'This isn't a fucking democracy. It's a meritocracy.'

'Meritocracy?' Zoe queried.

'The best person for the job gets it,' Diesel explained simply.

'And you think you're the best person to lead us. Is that it?' Xavier Wood said, cynically.

Diesel sighed, 'Our aim here is to survive, not to score cheap points against each other. And our best chance of making this situation work for us is to pool our resources and work together as a team. I didn't ask for this role but I had it thrust upon me. And I'm doing the best job I can.'

Herve Andre responded, 'How do we know who is good at doing what? Self recommendation means nothing. What if I said I was good at building a raft, would you work with me on it?'

Many pairs of eyes focused on the Captain as they waited for his response.'

Diesel cracked his knuckles. He looked at the shortish slender man. 'Mr Andre, Did you mention boat-building skills in your profile?' information?'

'N, no,' Herve, said, slightly stuttering.

'Are you skilled in such matters?' Diesel asked.

'Y, yes, I am.'

Bart, intrigued, said, 'What kind of boats?'

Herve said, 'I t, taught some kids how t, to build wooden canoes.'

Jerry sometimes felt unsociable and just wanted to crawl into his shell. Feeling uncomfortable around the other castaways he started whistling out of tune, an aspect of his Asperger syndrome. He absent mindedly tossed a piece of wood on the fire, then commented, 'So you know how to build a fucking canoe. That's going to be a fat lot of good in our situation.'

There were some chuckles from other people close by.

Herve, feeling anxious, found it difficult to speak. At length he managed, 'I t, taught the students t, to interpret plans created b by , yacht designers.'

'So, could you build, for example, a raft?' Amaryllis asked.'

Herve nodded, 'Yes.' Then, becoming more confident, he added, 'Rafts are slow and omni directional. A catamaran is a better way to go.'

It made sense to Diesel, 'OK, I think we have our boat maker. Go and talk to Herve if you're interested in helping.'

Bart added, 'We must still focus on finding freshwater. That is our main priority.' he added, 'We haven't heard from Skate and his crew so we have to assume they are camping out there tonight.'

Zoe, never saw herself as a liar. But she did stretch the truth sometimes. It went with the territory in American politics. As a spin doctor for Andrea Martyn, Zoe had to fudge the state of the economy a little to balance out the lies put out by the Arnold team in the primaries for Governor Arnold to get his presidential nomination. Zoe remembered the interview in which Arnold lied, while testifying under oath about Richard Spillain (the incumbent Governor of South Carolina) about undisclosed bribes from a business cartel.

It amused Zoe that In 2016 the Oxford dictionary invented Post truth" a new word about the art of lying to get your way in the political scene. Zoe, who worked for Spillain, knew the allegations were untrue. But she couldn't help but admire Arnold for his lying skills The man was a master salesman, unscrupulous, yes, but so convincing. Zoe couldn't stand the man and after his lies got him the Governor's mansion, Zoe resigned and took up the position of sales manager with a clothing store chain. A position that still made use of her stretching the truth skills, when competing with foreign imports, especially knock off labels from China.

Zoe thought about these things as she snuggled up to Jerry, in the double sleeping bag, under the makeshift shelter of branches and palm fronds. The reason it played on her mind was that, although there was no need for lying, on the island, Zoe could not help fudging the facts. She wanted to stop but just couldn't help it. It had become a habit. She gently nudged Jerry, who was snoring and stirring in his sleep. He could sleep just about anywhere, whereas Zoe pined for her comfortable water bed, which she'd had for many years.

'What do you want?' Jerry groaned.

What did she want? That was a good question. Her husband not to be impotent for one thing. It had been a long time since they had made love. It had taken a long while for them to accept the situation. Viagra had helped on occasion, but there were no little blue pills available on the island. She and Jerry were the only married couple among the castaways. As far as she knew no one else among those shipwrecked, were in an intimate relationship with another member. Some of the other

women on the island had mentioned how lucky she was to have her man with her. The more outspoken females in the group had questioned her about her sex life. She lied of course. After all this was the post truth era.

It was around midnight, and the moon was prominent in the sky. The ocean was calm as Ulysses Magan, and Vladimir Ruska rowed out to the wreck.

Vlad sang the same song over and over.

Ulysses complained, 'If you must sing, can you sing something else.'

'It's a Russian sea shanty.'

'I don't give a fuck what it is, it's driving me nuts.'

Vlad shrugged and stroked harder with the oar tips that barely touched the water. With an oar each, they had to synchronise their strokes, to keep on a straight course.

Ulysses broke the silence. 'What if there's a guard on the ship?'

Vlad stared at the American guy, 'Why the fuck would a guard be posted on the ship?'

Ulysses shrugged, 'I don't know mate. Maybe Becker's got something to hide.'

The youths rowed up to the reef, where they moored the lifeboat to a jagged piece of torn metal in the ripped hull. The pair of adventurers stood on the sharp ridge. 'Good job we're wearing trainers, right,' Ulysses said.

Vlad tensed his solid muscles as he climbed through the hole. He switched on a flashlight to get his bearings and his balance. Ulysses was soon beside him. 'This reminds me of those crazy crooked houses at the fair,' the American commented.

Vlad tied back his black, shoulder-length hair. He usually wore it braided, but that was when his lover styled it for him. Now she was gone, or rather Vladimir had left her, somewhere back in Moscow. Right now he was in the Delaware's flooded engine room. He said, 'This old ship runs on diesel. So there must be a shit load around here somewhere.'

'So what? We can't do anything with it.'

Vlad ignored the comment and climbed the crooked ladder, leaning over to keep his equilibrium.

Ulysses followed closely.

Neither of the young men had explored the ship before, but Vlad figured that if they kept climbing up ladders, they would come to the main deck. They could figure out where to go from there.

Eventually, the pair stepped out on the slanted floor. The sea air was bracing and cooled the boys down after their strenuous climb.

'So, what do we do now, mastermind?' Ulysses grinned.

'That looks like a hold cover over there,' Vlad said, pointing.

'You reckon there's something down there?' Ulysses queried.

'Just then they saw a flashlight and heard a voice.' What do you think you're doing?'

Vlad recognised the lanky guy, even in the shadows. 'Nothing much,' mate Vlad said. Just having a look around.'

Murphy eyed the pair as they clung to the railing. 'It's dangerous enough moving around this tub in the daytime. You have to be fucking crazy to move around here in the dark.'

'So what are you doing here?' Ulysses asked.

'If you must know I feel more at home on a ship, even if it is fucked like this one. 'Now I suggest you both fuck off and go back to the camp. If you pull a stunt like this again, I will tell your parents.'

Vlad said, 'Not unless you're a medium. My parents are dead. I'm here with my sister.'

Murphy said, 'Don't be a smart ass. Perhaps you'd like to see how the Captain feels about it?'

Ulysses edged along the rail to his new friend. 'Come on, mate, let's go.'

'You're not going back through the ship.' Bart stated.

'How are we supposed to get back then?' Ulysses asked.

'You blokes are young, and you look pumped so abseil down the side of the hull.'

'We'll need a rope.'

Murphy nodded, 'Boats are big on ropes. Shine your torch over there and you'll see how I climb up to this deck.'

Vlad did so and saw ropes descending from the davits to the rocks below. 'Cool,' he said, as he clambered over the side of the Delaware and used the line to lower him to the reef. As Ulysses joined him, Vlad said, 'What if Bart didn't just sleep on the ship out of choice? What if he's guarding something he doesn't want anyone to see?'

Chapter 15

William felt anxious and nervous about walking into the camp among the marooned people. It was early morning a fresh wind blew down the coast. William hid in the undergrowth near one of gnarly sheoaks, from where he observed what was going on. It was true what the Apelion had reported. It was time to infiltrate the beach dwellers. William felt anxious about interacting with other humans. He had been alone on Izzania for so many years he had forgotten how to deal with other people. He craved human attention but, at the same time, dreaded making contact, having been out of touch with the outside world. He would log one more report to inform David of the intruders. Staxis would have to take notice and come and deal with the problem - their problem. If they did not acknowledge him this time, he would have to go to plan B. For that he needed to get to know the castaways. Plan B was William's escape plan. For that to materialise he had to find out about the intruders' story. Before that, he had to get back and carry out his routines. If he did not attend to the timer of the electric fence, holding in the Apelions, it would switch off and they could escape. Sakko, Staxis' prototype could move freely around Izzania. He was the only one, though. If the others breached the force field, they could go feral. If that happened nobody on the Island was safe. William looked up at the morning sky as the sun slowly rose from behind the trees. It would take a good three hours to get back to the facility and William had to be there by 10 o'clock, to carry out his daily tasks. He figured that if he got moving now he could complete his work and be back at the beach camp by mid-afternoon.

As a seaman, Bart Murphy was somewhat superstitious, although he would never admit it. Ocean travel, before modern technology took over, was a risky venture. So sailors adopted endless practices and beliefs aimed at protecting them from the gods of the deep. They heeded superstitions like it was bad luck to begin a voyage on a Friday; Killing albatrosses was a definite no, no; As was bringing bananas aboard? and whistling was considered bad luck. Bart, like most mariners, had forgotten, or never knew the reason for such odd superstitions. Still, it was better to err on the safe side and pacify the gods. Much to Bart's concern, the Delaware had started its ill-fated voyage from Fort Lauderdale on a Friday. The first mate warned his skipper there would be trouble ahead, but he went ahead anyway. Diesel held no store in such wives tales, but the Captain did not sail on that Friday to taunt the ocean deities. He did so to get one step ahead of the coastguard. Another day in port and the Delaware would have been impounded.

Bart never saw himself as a fervent religionist. Still, if he had to write his religion on a form, he claimed to be a polytheist, which he saw to be the safest option. The first mate considered it very risky to put all his eggs in one basket, or as his witty self put it "all his eggs in one basket". He thought that as a polytheist if one deity did not come up with the goods, he could always try another.

Bart mused over such things as he placed the coffee grounds in the pot hanging from a small metal tripod he had fashioned from scraps from the ship's galley. This he put over the small fire he had just lit. Bart's compassionate personality shone through as he brewed steaming coffee for the early risers.

Skate, back from his failed quest to find fresh water, was the first to arrive. He said, 'Good Morning, Bart.'

Bart looked at the square-jawed man with a small, slightly turned-up nose. Bart found facial features interesting and the turned-up nose went with Skate's snootiness, that he sometimes expressed. It had been his way of holding his head up while pilloried by Traverse City's chamber of commerce. He never boasted of his massive success as a Realtor. What would be the point on the Island?

Bart poured some coffee into a tin mug and handed it to Skate. 'That should get you going.'

'Yes, but going where?' The big tanned guy wearing one of his ubiquitous sarongs, asked, 'Are you coming with us, Bart?'

'Where?'

'To find fresh water. Where else?'

'No, mate. I've got duties to carry out around here.'

The big guy said, 'Well, wish us luck.'

'If you find the water out there, we all get lucky.'

Just then, Godiva turned up for coffee.

The two men looked down at the short woman dressed in a sun-faded white outfit. Bart said, 'You're up early, Godiva.'

She indicated Skate, 'I've got to take him to our bonfire again.'

'Well we did get to see the mountain, but we couldn't get close enough to see any water courses.'

'So what are you going to do this time?' Bart asked.

Skate grinned, 'Get closer and then hopefully we'll find a good source of freshwater.'

'God willing,' Godiva said, qualifying, 'if such a person exists.'

'Not just one - many' The barista corrected.'

'Well he doesn't! And the sooner we realise there are no saviours and we have to help ourselves, the better.' Skate stated, vehemently.

Sensing a heated debate building up, Bart quelled the flames of the argument. 'Each to their own religion, I say. Then he added, here's your coffee, Godiva.'

Godiva, suitably impressed, 'Said you handled that well. You'd probably make a good judge.'

Skate said, 'What do you know about the way the judicial system works, Godiva?' He added, 'Have you been up before a judge.'

'No, but I used to be one.'

The two men looked at her, open-mouthed. Bart said, 'Jeez, you kept that one quiet. But now I can add you to the list.'

'I'd rather you didn't. It just slipped out, so don't read anything into it. I resigned before I left and I'm finished being a cog in the massive legal system.'

Bart said, 'There is no legal system here. But your wisdom and expertise can help us have one.'

Skate said, 'I agree with Godiva. We don't need a legal system here. We came to escape all that shit.'

'Now wait a minute, Skate, I didn't say that. We need some kind of rule of law but I don't want that responsibility,' Godiva objected.

'Well I believe here we can all be equal.'

Bart, Said, 'If we don't have some kind of moral code we all believe in people will take the law into their hands and ...'

'You don't get it, mate,' Skate said, addressing Bart, 'people can only break laws if we make them. Godiva, surprised to hear an Atheist talk about having a moral code, said, 'Among the fifty or so people stranded on this island we have many racial and religious demographics. There's Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and unbelievers, among others. How do you expect them to adhere to a single moral code?' Seeing the puzzled looks on the men's faces, she further explained. This subject needs a bigger arena. It's very important that we vote in a system that protects and benefits of everyone equally. And that's not going to be easy.'

Skate said, 'The natural way is survival of the fittest. That's how it works in nature.'

Bart turned to Godiva. 'Would you chair such a meeting.'

Godiva did not think she was the best moral compass in the group. There were still things they did not know about her. 'I would much rather offer advice from behind the scene.'

Bart smiled, 'Good idea. I'll inform the skipper.'

Chapter 16

Alexei awoke to a vivid dawn chorus. The lowland forest was already becoming steamy, and Alexei tossed aside the fern leaves that had kept him warm during the night. The rain forest was still in partial darkness as the sun had not yet penetrated gaps in the canopy. He listened to the melodic

fluty phrases of butcher birds as they welcomed the new day. It was a welcome change from the incessant calls of nocturnal frogs and insects that carried on all through the night. These sounds eventually faded as the daytime creatures became active. Alexei picked out the songs of robins, whistlers, cockatoos and birds of paradise. His mouth was dry, which reminded him of his goal. He looked around and saw fallen palm leaves with natural bowls at one end. Some had collected small amounts of water, which Alexei tediously poured into his water canteen. There was also the trickle of water he had heard during the night, a pleasant, soothing sound that lulled him into spasmodic sleep.

Alexei was hungry, but he had no food and would have to find something on the trail. He donned his wide-brimmed hat, put on his sunglasses, backpack and continued in yesterday's direction. The Estonian figured there would be a lot of edible fruit-bearing plants along the way. But how would he know which ones were for human consumption? Back in Estonia, in Lahemaa, Alexei's dad had given him a few survival tips if he ever found himself in a wilderness. Never eat anything if you're not sure of its effect on you. Look for fruits and vegetables that remind you of the ones you're used to. And, if not sure, rub the food item on the sensitive flesh of your inner arm near the elbow. If the food doesn't make you come out in a rash, it's probably OK to eat.

The first thing he came across looked like a small hard apple. Despite his short stature, Alexei could reach up and pluck the fruit from the tree. It had a sharp taste, but Alexei soon got used to the tartness, but only ate the one wild apple. As Alexei continued walking through the forest, he came across many and varied, colourful life forms he had never seen before. So much got his attention that many less visible species went unnoticed. That was until he saw some mushrooms on the rain forest floor. Hidden among the leaf litter on the ground bright red fungi with long thin stems grew in clumps. Alexei had read somewhere that these mushrooms played a vital role. Still, for most of their lives, they remained hidden inside rotting wood or naturally mulched soil. They only made a brief appearance when it was time to reproduce. They looked inviting to eat but could have been toxic. So Alexei left them alone.

Further up the track, he saw small birds - he did not know what type - pecking away at small metallic purple berries. As Alexei stopped to watch, he felt an eerie sensation that someone or something was watching him.

It took a good two hours to reach the headland and Godiva arrived there with Skate, and his people around 9 am. Skate stood by the bonfire and scanned the panorama. He had binoculars with him, and he looked across the valley at the mountain. Skate thought he saw a wisp of smoke at the top. 'I wonder if it's volcanic?' he said to Godiva, who just shrugged.

Jerry borrowed the field glasses and looked through them at the looming mountain, with swirling rain clouds obscuring the peak. But Jerry couldn't see any silvery traces representing water flowing down the mountainside. He handed back the magnifiers. 'I guess we need to get closer before we can see any water flowing.' Then he mentioned, 'It could be a good days walk to get to the foothills.' Skate said, 'So we'd better hitch up and get moving.'

Kiara mused about how much Janice would have liked to be on the tropical island. Janice was by far the most adventurous one in their relationship. Kiara had tried to get her friend to come with her but she decided to stay behind. Now Kiara was the more adventurous one but not by choice. She shucked her pack onto her back and followed the small group as they walked away, leaving Godiva by herself.

Godiva looked out at the vast expanse of the endless ocean. What are the chances of a ship passing by? She asked herself. Or an aircraft flying over the island? Building the bonfire had been a bit of a distraction, but it was hardly practical. Especially as they still had no way of lighting it quickly.

It was all downhill on the way back, and Godiva soon reached the beach. As she walked along the sand, paddling in shallow water as the sea went in and out, she had plenty of time to reflect on her past. Godiva remembered her early years in Memphis. Back in the 80s, she remembered shopping with her mom. They lived in North Sarasota, where they caught the bus to the city. Godiva remembered the fun times she had with her mom in Raleigh Springs Mall. You could just about buy anything you wanted in the Mall. That's what Godiva thought at the time. They would stop at The

Peddler for lunch, where waiters cut your selected steak at the table. After their lunch, they sometimes went to a movie. That was before DVDs, and home entertainment closed the theatres down. Now, Bookstar and Stein Mart replaced the old restaurant.

Godiva stored up the good times she had with her mom, mainly so she didn't have to revisit the bad things in her mind. Her dad worked at the new Nissan factory in Smyrna, where he was employed as a welder. It was hard work, and he was away a lot. As soon as she heard his little blue Nissan hatch stop in the driveway, Godiva rushed out to greet him. He sometimes had a present for his little girl, that was when he hadn't drunk away the family budget before he arrived home.

Godiva snapped out of her reverie at the sound of a voice yelling from further down the beach. When he was around 30 feet away, she recognised Diesel Becker. 'Good morning, Captain,' she said as he approached.

'Good morning to you, Godiva, I've been looking for you.'

She looked up at Diesel, and for the first time noticed his slightly slanting hazel eyes. 'Well, now you've found me, so what do you want?'

Diesel gave a warm smile, 'We need to discuss something. So if you're going back to camp, I'd like to accompany you and we can talk on the way.'

'Yes, then you might get around to what's on your mind.'

As the pair avoided stepping on jellyfish, Diesel explained, 'Why didn't you mention you were a judge?'

'Because that part of my life is over.'

'Do you realise how important your legal expertise is going to be on this island.'

'Captain, I've heard all the arguments about this from Bart. I presume he is the one who told you this,' she said brusquely.

'He said that you may agree to act in an advisory capacity.'

Godiva stopped to pick up a pretty shell.

The Captain waited for her to catch up, then he said, 'I think we need some sort of manifesto or simple constitution and I would like you to work on it.'

Godiva stared at Diesel, 'You don't want much, do you?'

'What do you mean?'

'It took a team of the smartest men in America to frame and write the American Constitution, and you expect me to write one up for our company of marooned souls.'

'I can get people to help you.'

Godiva reached up and grabbed Diesel's arm to get his attention. 'Captain, I'm an agnostic when it comes to God. I don't believe in angels giving Moses two great hunks of stone, but I reckon the Ten Commandments cover all the basics and is a good place to start.'

'Except the bit about only worshipping God.'

'I meant, only as a guideline,' the judge corrected.

Diesel beamed, 'Smart thinking Godiva. Now you know why we need you.'

'Go on admit it. You like him,' Vlad said as he and his sister lay down on a blanket after their swim. She stretched out luxuriously. 'Ulysses is OK, I guess.' But he gets restless and fidgets a bit when he's anxious. That really annoys me.'

'Are you expecting perfection in a man, sis?'

Jas turned to Vlad. 'Of course. I won't settle for anything less.'

'I fear you'll be disappointed with this bunch.'

Jas said, 'I don't know about that. There's that short Estonian Guy. He seems interesting.'

Vlad propped himself up on his elbows. 'Come to think of it I haven't seen him around for a couple of days.'

'You're right bro. I'm not surprised though, He does keep to himself.'

'That's all the more reason to find out what's happened to him,' Vlad said, getting up.

William figured the younger people would be easier to dupe. Perhaps dupe was a too stronger word. He was just gathering information, and the young woman was alone. She was beautiful. He

approached her tentatively. 'Excuse me, but I'm looking for the leader of this group.' William hoped he did not sound as odd as he felt.

Jasoslava turned her head to face the man and removed her sun shades. He was quite tall, lean, and deeply tanned. The stranger had a pleasant face with a semblance of a smile playing on his lips. But, his mono brow put him in the imperfect basket. Jasoslava looked at the stranger. 'Who are you. I haven't seen you around.'

William looked down at the almost skinny girl and he was caught by her light brown eyes. He needed a plausible story. 'Abiding by his life rule, tell the truth where possible as long as it does not blow the cover story, he said, 'I'm William. Can you tell me who is leading you?'

He looked around the forty mark. 'How come I've never seen 'you' around the camp?'

He countered. 'How come I have never seen you before?'

Touch'e, she thought.

'William Mosley,' he smiled, stretching out his hand.'

'And you're from the wreck.' As soon as the words tumbled out, Jasoslava wished she could have retracted them. She felt a fool asking such a dumb question. Of course, he was from the wreck.

Where else would he have come from?'

William grinned, 'No, I was beamed down from a UFO.'

Jasoslava replaced her shades. 'Well, William, I don't know where the Captain is. You'll have to ask someone else.'

'Can you come with me?'

Jasoslava stared at him. 'Is this some kind of fucking joke?'

He looked at her sheepishly. 'I'm embarrassed to say this, but I'm timid and keep to myself.'

She eye-balled him, puzzled. Was he for real? 'Why do you want to see the Captain?'

'He shrugged, 'I guess it's time for me to join in and help.'

She searched his pale brown eyes. 'I don't know if I can trust you. I don't know what your game is.'

'I kept myself to myself because the thought of being part of the group terrified me.'

'So, what has changed?' Jasoslava asked.

William looked straight at the young woman. 'I think that being shipwrecked like this is creating challenges for all of us. I realised I needed to rise to the challenge. So here I am.'

Jasoslava said, 'Then go and see Captain Becker but I'm not taking you to him.'

As William walked along the beach, he strode confidently along the hard, damp sand to suggest he belonged with the castaways. He also knew he had to offer something that would be useful to the marooned people. He approached a woman, with long black hair. She was tall and wore a long faded dress. William said, 'Where can I find the Captain?'

Zoe looked at the tall, tanned man. 'I haven't seen you here before.'

William smiled, 'Same here. So where can I find him?'

'He's probably out on his precious ship,' she said, with sarcasm in her voice.'

William looked out at the listing wreck. He nodded and walked on.

As he approached the main camp area, he bumped into a heavy built Japanese man wearing a colourful cloak. 'Oh, excuse me, but I'm looking for our Captain.'

Denji eyed the lean man with short blond hair, slightly going to gray. 'I think he is out on the wreck.'

'How can I get out there?'

Denji looked for the lifeboats, but they were both gone. He said, 'The tide is out. You can walk out there, or swim if you like.'

'I'm not really dressed for swimming,' William grinned.'

OK, you could wait until he comes back.'

'When will that be?'

The Japanese man shrugged. 'Before dark, I guess. You'd better ask Bart or Amaryllis. If anyone knows his movements, they will.'

William said, 'Where will I find them?'

Denji, becoming a little suspicious, said, 'How come you don't know these things?'

William stuck to his story. 'I suffer from acute shyness and am overwhelmed by crowds. So I haven't been involved with the rest of this group.'

Feeling he was trampling in William's personal territory, Denji bowed slightly. 'My apologies Mr?' 'Mosley. William Mosley.'

'You will find Amaryllis in the main shelter.'

Chapter 17

Alexei had been following the forest creek for hours. He was feeling hunger pangs. Berries were OK for a snack, but he needed something more substantial. Alexei had seen possums, lemurs and even a tree kangaroo, but he had no means of catching them. He couldn't get close enough with his hunting knife. Besides most of the small mammals spent their time up in the trees. He needed a bow and arrows. Alexei's mind went back to the time his father had taken him into the Estonian wilderness. Part of his survival training was making his own bow and arrows. It was a long time ago, and Alexei had some difficulty in remembering everything his father had said. Recalling the basics, Alexei chose a straight green sapling about an inch in diameter. He stood it on the ground and measured it up to his chin. Using his sharp, heavy hunting knife as an axe, Alexei cut the stave to length. Alexei already had a ball of strong twine and a roll of duct tape in his pack. Both items had many uses when out in the wilderness. The strong cord was perfect for a bowstring, and the duct tape came in useful for making fletching for the arrows.

Alexei's attention was drawn to a rustling sound loud enough to be heard over the birdsong. It was a possum looking at the human, with its bright orange eyes. It reminded Alexei of the creature he had seen the day before except it was much smaller. There was no threat, so Alexei settled back to his task. Using his hunting knife, the reporter began removing material from the back of the stave.

Once the bow had been shaved back to his satisfaction, Alexei tapered the ends and, using the saw in his Swiss penknife, cut notches at each end of the stave. He tied both ends in place and tested the tension. Alexei had his survival bow. Now he had to concentrate on the arrows. They had to be light, rigid and straight; about two feet long and half inch in diameter.

By the time the reporter was happy with his bow, it was around dusk. He lit a small fire, not just to provide him with warmth but also to harden the wooden points of his arrows. Having fashioned half a dozen arrows, the Estonian used his duct tape to take the place of feathered fletching.

Skate could hear the sound of running water, but he had not yet mentioned it to his team because at first, he wasn't sure, but now he was pretty confident there was fresh water in the valley. It had been tough going making their way through the undergrowth restricted by poor sunlight penetration to ground level. In some areas the leaf canopy was thinned out, and, in extreme cases, destroyed. The forest floor had been colonised by a dense tangle of vines, shrubs and small trees. Skate and his people were greatly relieved once they had emerged from the forest into open woodland.

The sound of water deep down in the valley called to Skate, and he wanted to keep going. But they needed a break to have a meal before returning to the task. Bart had supplied Skate with supplies from the emergency rations store. It was not that exciting - canned meat and dried fruit. But to the pioneers, after their long hot trek, it was manna from heaven.

Khalid, couldn't eat the spam because it was processed pork. He had to make do with dried apricots and dates.

Jerry looked at the narrow-faced man with a prominent nose. 'Surely, under circumstances like this, Allah will forgive you for eating pork.'

Khalid offered no reply and just smiled.

Jerry said, 'What if we caught a wild pig. Would you eat some?'

The Muslim said, 'No.'

Skate got in on the act, 'Why can you guys eat some meat but not pork?'

Khalid felt pressured but still remained silent on the matter. Little did Skate and the others know that Khalid had been a Halal food inspector before embarking on the ill-fated voyage. There was more than that to the story, but he did not feel obligated to tell anybody.

Although the woman, Kiara, had not taunted him with questions she was not as sweet and innocent as she made out. It was her body, not her voice that taunted him. She wore little if anything under her long dress. He silently asked Allah to protect him from the harlot's wicked enticement. Kiara had other things on her mind. She had kept it secret from the group, but she suffered from mild Agoraphobia. Kiara felt much more relaxed in the tightly enclosed rain forest. Now she had to deal with the vast open space as they descended into the valley. There was a time back in Chicago when intense fear and anxiety prevented her from leaving her home. Kiara was afraid to go outside in public in case she had a panic attack and humiliated herself in front of strangers. Or it happened in a place where nobody was available to help her. Josie, Kiara's best friend, was so concerned about her avoidance behaviour she sought professional help on Kiara's behalf. Josie encouraged her to see a specialist who reviewed her symptoms and diagnosed her condition as acute Agoraphobia. That was the first step of her long hard road to recovery. Now, if she employed relaxation techniques, she was able to cope. Before walking through the open woodland Kiara, took some deep breaths and desensitisation to overcome fear triggers. Kiara had become very good at reducing and masking her panic attacks so that nobody around her noticed anything was troubling her. The night of the shipwreck was a nightmare for everyone on the Delaware, but it was especially terrifying for Kiara. The storm, the waves and the general panic onboard all added to Kiara's abject fear about leaving her cabin. Stuck in her own private hell, she cowered in a corner trying to slow her breath. As they traversed the drier less fertile landscape, They came across many varieties of hardwood. Clumps of eucalyptus were interspersed with, acacia and brush box. Skate recognised some Casuarina's, which, more protected from the wind, seemed much healthier and less gnarly and weather beaten than their beach she-oak counterparts. He stopped and listened. Yes, he could hear faster running water. He looked at the looming mountain across the valley, which was further away than he first thought.

Jerry interrupted him. 'Can you still hear it?'

'Yes, and it's becoming louder.'

Jerry grinned, 'Man, that's good news. How far away do you reckon?'

Skate reached for his field glasses. He pointed at some thick brush at the bottom of a grassy slope a couple of kilometres to his left. 'I reckon that's the place. Looking through his binoculars, Skate said, 'I don't only hear it. Now I can see it.'

Jerry put out his hand. 'Let me have a look.'

Khalid approached Jerry. 'Have you found water?'

'So you're talking to me now.' Jerry chided

'Not about my personal business.'

Skate stared at the Muslim. 'Why did you come along with us if you don't want to exchange experiences?'

'I am here to survive. So I come looking for water.' He added, 'I'm not here to justify my beliefs for you.'

The Muslim had a point. Skate mollified a little. 'Yes, we have found water.'

Khalid turned his eyes heavenward, 'Praise be to Allah the compassionate and merciful.'

Ignoring Khalid's prayer, Jerry handed Skate his field glasses. Then he said, 'OK, let's get moving. The water beckons us.'

Skate and his people had been following a path of sorts in between wattle, brush box and turpentine trees. Now they had to venture off the beaten track into unknown territory.

Following a steeper descent into the valley, the group trod carefully so as not to slip. Hanging onto the trunks of young eucalypts and sturdy shrubs all the members of the adventurous team heard the sweetest of sounds -that of fast-flowing water. As they emerged, sweaty, scratched and grimy-faced out of box thorn bushes, they saw a vision that gladdened all their hearts - a thirty-foot waterfall with a fast-flowing creek. The team went into a spontaneous group hug, each silently thanking their gods or the planet, in their own way. Having found the precious water supply, the group dealt with their next two priorities - food and shelter.

Khalid walked by the creek in the shade under sprawling Tea trees. He stood quietly awhile, then he saw silvery movement in the water. It seemed that trevally, cod, bream and flathead were in abundance. Khalid used his razor-sharp hunting knife and chose the straightest section of the branch he could find to fashion into a spear.

'Where's Khalid gone?' Skate asked as he and Kiara built a small campfire.

'Probably to pray to Allah,' She said, disparagingly.

Skate said, 'We all came on this voyage for our own reasons, and each of us probably harbours secrets - things we don't want to talk about.'

'Yeah. So?'

'Well imagine what it must be like to be the only Muslim among Christians?' It would be like a chick hatching and discovering all the other hatchlings were baby crocodiles,' Skate chuckled.

Kiara stared at the team leader. 'So, you expect me to have sympathy for him?'

'That's not what I'm saying. I don't expect you to do anything, except perhaps try and see it from Khalid's point of view.'

Just then, the Muslim turned up with a brace of flathead on his spear.

'You are full of surprises,' Jerry said.

'I learned spearfishing as a recreational sport in California.'

'So, you've been to Cali,' Skate said.'

Khalid said, 'I was born in Oakland.'

This comment caused raised eyebrows

'My father had a franchise in the 'Best Muslim Bakery.'

'So you're an American citizen?'

Khalid responded. 'I'm a Muslim, so you immediately expect me to be a camel jockey. And you also assume that I am a terrorist.'

Skate and Jerry, admonished, went sheepish.

Kiara said, 'What do you expect. Your lot wants to see us all dead.'

Khalid looked at her, scornfully. 'You may fool these men with your portrayal of innocence but not me.'

'Just because you're repressed by your society do not take it out on me. With that, Kiara turned her back on Khalid and walked away.

'But you won't mind eating my fish,' he stated.'

She turned to him, gave him the bird and said, 'You can stuff your fucking fish!'

Skate said, 'What the hell is it with you two?'

Jerry, now feeling settled and friendly, said, 'Come on. We all need to work together. Let's get a fire going and cook the fish.'

Skate turned to Khalid, 'You'll have to teach me how to use a spear.'

The Muslim said, 'We use a small trident type spear for gigging bullfrogs or carp in the shallows.'

Kiara Huntingdon sat by herself wrapping her arms around her fleece-lined jacket. She wore a shawl wrapped around her head to help her keep warm. She looked up as Skate approached, but said nothing. She felt bad about her outburst. Normally, in arguments, she played the role of peacemaker, but not when it came to Muslims.

Skate said, 'Come on over to the fire and eat some fish.'

She shook her head. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Bull crap. You haven't eaten since lunch. So bury your pride and do yourself a favour.'

Kiara's deep set brown eyes fixed on him. 'That fucking pervert undresses me with his eyes, while acting high and mighty. And his a fucking liar.'

'What do you mean?'

'If he grew up in Oakland he'd be used to seeing women in bikinis and he wouldn't be so fucking puritanical now.'

'Then, come over to the fire and we can all discuss it.'

Kiara said, 'I am cold and hungry but I don't want to talk about it.' Her mind was on something else

- something private. She remembered the moment the smartly dressed Major from the Defence Department called at her home to see her parents. Kiara had hidden behind the door when she learned that her brother, Sgt 1st Class Tomas Huntingdon a US service member was killed while on duty in Afghanistan. He had been shot by the Taliban while on a routine patrol. Kiara remembered rushing upstairs and shutting herself in her bedroom, where she sobbed and sobbed.

As the castaways slept that night next to the fire, now just embers and ash in the small circle of stones, Sakko observed them. He could easily cave their skulls in with his club but he had not been ordered to do so. Instead, he let them live another day and quietly shambled off back to the compound.

Alexei tested the tautness of his bow. Making it was one thing, but developing the skill to use it effectively was a whole different story. It had been decades since Alexei's father had shown him how to hunt with a bow and arrows. The Estonian notched an arrow and pulled it back. The tension felt good. He heard rustling in the branches. Alexei craned his neck to see what was making the noise. He caught a glimpse of a possum, quite a large one. Alexei aimed and let fly with the arrow. It missed its mark, blunting its point against the hard bark of the fig tree. By the time he'd notched another arrow the creature had disappeared into the foliage. So far it was possum 1 archer zero. Alexei waited for the possum to return. But the creature was not that stupid and Alexei had to go looking for it.

Just then a snake slithered across the hunter's path. He froze as the big carpet snake slowly crossed over to the tall reeds growing along the creek. Then he caught another glimpse of the possum. This time before firing he focused on where the arrow was supposed to go, not where it had come from. This time his aim was true and the creature fell off its branch and hit the ground behind the fig tree. So Alexei had to scabble around in the thick undergrowth where he eventually found the dead creature. Alexei stared at his dinner. The arrow had hit it in the heart; it had died immediately. He was surprised that his aim was that good. He wouldn't go hungry that day.

Chapter 18

As William Mosley, trudged along the beach, he thought back to the time he first set foot on Izzania. He and the other scientists with him had arrived by an AW189 helicopter, which could hold up to 16 passengers. It was all very exciting for William, who had just graduated in quantum physics, to be snapped up by Staxis. There was not much about the company posted on the Internet, but he and ten other scientists had been especially chosen to carry out top secrets experiments for the American government. That was all he knew at the time. William did figure the military connection as he and the other scientists boarded an Aircraft carrier, which took them to within 50 kilometres of Izzania, the island that became Williams exile for twenty odd years. His mind snapped back to the present when he saw the long-haired man wearing a Captain's hat.

Diesel saw the lean, tall man walking towards him, a man he'd never seen before.

William said, 'Are you the Captain?'

Diesel eye-balled him, 'And who the hell are you?'

'I'm a survivor from that wreck, out there.'

'How come I've never set eyes on you before, Mr?'

'William. William Mosley. I keep very much to myself.'

Diesel put his hands together and cracked his knuckles. 'Mr Mosley, I never saw you on my ship and the this is the first time I've seen you on this island.'

'It's the island that I've come to see you about.'

'What do you mean?'

William dipped his hand into a shoulder bag he kept with him, And produced a rolled up scroll tied with string. He handed it to Diesel, who looked at it bemused. 'What's this?'

William had his story ready and it had to sound plausible. 'A map of this island.'

The Captain stared at the stranger, his eyes popping. He took off the string and unrolled the document. Sure enough it was the map of an island. 'Diesel couldn't take his eyes off the chart.'

'Where the fuck did you get this?'

William looked at the Captain, poker faced. 'I found it.'

'Found it! Where?'

'Well, I dug it up. it was buried in the sand.'

'And did you find anything else buried in the sand, Mr Mosley?'

'Just the tin that contained the map.'

'Where's the tin?'

William smiled, 'I reburied it, so I know where I found the map.'

Diesel removed his cap and scratched his head. 'I want you to show me where you found this map.'

William having walked for many hours, said, 'I'm really tired right now. I'll happily show you tomorrow morning.'

The Captain did not entirely trust the stranger or his map. 'I don't know what to make of you, Mr Mosley. You'll need someone to vouch for you before you get accepted into our camp.'

William shook his head. 'I don't know any of the other folks so I doubt anyone can corroborate my story. But let me ask you this, Captain. If i did not come from your ship, where did I come from?'

Diesel adjusted his neck until it clicked into place. 'Well you've got me there. Unless, of course, you were already on the island.'

William, surprised at the Captain's suggestion, responded, 'And how likely is that, Captain?'

Diesel pointed at the map. 'If this is authentic and you did find it, somebody else is on this island.'

As soon as the sun came up Diesel and William went to the place where the latter allegedly found the map. As William had buried the box containing the map the previous day, he knew its location.

He did not want to make finding the spot too easy, so he deliberately dug holes in the wrong places.

Diesel, sighed, 'This is a waste of time. Are you sure you know where you found the map?'

William looked around and scratched his head. 'it was definitely around here somewhere.' He turned to the Captain. 'You've got the map so does it really matter where it came from?'

'I'm just trying to see if your story holds up.'

It was time to show Diesel the correct spot. William, still playing his game, said, 'I know it was nearby here somewhere.' Then, indicating a smooth stone half-buried in the sand, William scabbled around the partially buried rock and came up with a rusty metal box. He handed it to Diesel.'

The Captain looked at the tin. He took out the scrolled map and placed in the box. It fitted, just, placed diagonally. The tin had a hinged lid with faded writing on it. It was stenciled on but was illegible. He handed it back to William. 'Can you make out what it says?'

'No. Why is that important.'

Diesel shrugged, 'Maybe it could provide a clue as to who made the map.'

The Wetopia group had their own beach hut, where they gossiped and chewed the fat over issues affecting them on the Island. The day's topic was about how they ended up marooned and the way they coped with their situation.

Gretchen Magan explained, 'They raided our house at 3 am. They dragged Enrico away. It was terrible! He was trying to reach out to me as he disappeared into the night.' Gretchen held back a tear. 'All because he didn't have a green card. He'd worked for a construction company for many years, and in all that time he was law-abiding and didn't even get a parking ticket. Yet they drag him away as though he was some big criminal.'

Amaryllis, another member of Wetopia, looked at the plump woman with a full figure, 'He was a criminal if he didn't have a green card. Just because the Immigration people had been slack in the past doesn't mean your husband wasn't committing a crime.'

Rachel O'Reilly backed up Amaryllis. 'It's bad enough when legit migrants take jobs from American citizens, but it's even worse if people enter the country illegally and then work for cash wages.'

Gretchen looked at the other women. She was surprised at their cold responses, but she couldn't fault their reasoning. She continued, 'With Enrico gone, I had no income. I could not get work . I couldn't pay my bills and Ulysses and I were soon on the street.'

'How terrible for you,' Nariko, the oldest member of the women's' group, commented.

'So what did you do?' Amaryllis asked.

'Ulysses is an American citizen, so he left school and got a job flipping burgers. That was where he found out about Wetopia, a social networking site helping members to take control of their lives. One of the blog threads was about a ship that was taking people to New Zealand. My life in America was in the toilet. We had nothing to lose, so we decided to give it a go.'

Zoe sat sketching Gretchen. She was what was known in the world as Rubenesque. Zoe put aside her pencils and asked, 'How did you manage to pay for your passage then?'