

A Sudden Crush

(A ROMANTIC COMEDY)

CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Honeymoon

“Excuse me,” I say, trying to attract the attention of the man sitting next to me on the plane.

He ignores me.

I try again. “Um, excuse me?” I need to sort this out before we take off.

Nothing.

Is he brushing me off on purpose?

I decide to gently tap my index finger on his shoulder. “Um, sir, excuse me...”

This time I get a brusque, “Yes?” back.

I start my pitch with a smile. “Hi, sorry to bother you—”

“Then don’t.”

I’m taken aback by this guy’s rudeness, but not enough to desist. “Sorry again. It will take only a minute, I promise.”

He rolls his eyes in an exaggerated gesture, but I ignore his body language and continue. *I have to try.*

“I got married today,” I say with a dreamy, I-cannot-believe-I-am-this-happy smile, “and we, I mean my husband and I, were held back at the reception for so long, the goodbyes took forever, and then there was an accident on the highway—”

“You have a point?” the man interrupts with the same gruff attitude.

“Yeah, of course.” I try to keep my cool as I need to ask this ogre a favor. “My point is that we arrived at the airport super late and there were no seats left for us to sit together, so I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind switching places with my husband. He’s over there.” I point at Liam.

The grumpy ogre takes a casual look at Liam and snorts loudly.

“Was that a yes?” I ask hopefully.

“No, miss, it wasn’t.”

“It’s Mrs., actually, and—”

“He’s sitting in an aisle seat,” the ogre says. “I want to be in a window one. Anyway, if you ask me, your husband doesn’t appear too bothered with his seating accommodation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That he seems pretty comfortable chatting with the top model next to him, not worrying too much about his annoying wife not being there to hold his hand.”

“That... you’re the rudest man I’ve ever met!” I’m puffing with indignation. How dare he say those things to me? “You don’t know me, how can you say—”

“I’ve known you the whole of ten minutes, and already I’ve had enough. I can’t help but imagine the poor guy is happy he’s having a break.”

With that last nasty comment, the troll turns around, presenting me with his shoulders, and goes back to staring out the window.

I turn toward Liam. Admittedly, he seems pretty engrossed in his conversation. I can’t see the woman very well. They’re on the opposite side of the plane to the right, four rows down from me, and in first class, four rows is a lot of space. I crane my neck backwards, but I see only the top of a blondish head. She must be tall for her head to pop out like that; it’s almost even with Liam’s, and he’s six-foot-two. What are they talking about? And why isn’t he trying to have her switch places with me?

I push the request-a-flight-attendant button. This is not how my honeymoon was supposed to begin. So far, this journey has been a nightmare. We left the reception too late, and Liam got mad at me for wanting to say goodbye to everyone. And at home, my bag wasn’t exactly one hundred percent packed. I was maybe eighty percent done, at the very minimum. But how was I supposed to know the movers had completely ignored my

directions for packing, and that none of my things was in the right boxes at our new house? It took me forever to locate the stuff I was missing.

Then there was traffic. Again, it was hardly my fault that some idiot decided to speed up on I-294, lose control of his car, and create the most prodigious traffic jam in Chicago's history. But Liam is so fastidious about his pre-flight buffer time that, for him, arriving one hour before the departure was almost as bad as missing the plane altogether.

To be fair, when we finally showed up at the airline desk we were the last two people to check-in, and we had to make do with whatever places there were left. No matter how much I whined with the clerk about it being our honeymoon, she said there was nothing she could do at this point and that we would have to try to switch places with someone else on the plane. Which is what I'm trying to do. Only I'm sitting next to a brute.

I throw a sulky glance at him. He must be a couple of years older than me and looks like a cross between a surfer and a lumberjack. He's probably someone's type, but most definitely not mine... too unrefined, too big, and too dark. He has mocha-brown eyes and longish black hair bleached light brown at the points. His strong jaw is covered by a three or four day's stubble, he has a stubborn mouth, and his face is too rawboned. He's wearing a horrible checkered reddish shirt rolled up at the elbows that leaves his tanned forearms exposed, a pair of faded gray cargo pants, and sneakers. He has a general air of unkemptness or wilderness about him and doesn't look to me like someone who belongs in first class.

Not that I'm a frequent patron; this is my first time ever. But Liam said we shouldn't settle for our honeymoon, so here we are in plush, bed-like chairs half a plane away from each other. Right now, I'd give up this ridiculously large throne and happily sit in coach if it meant getting to be beside my husband.

"Excuse me, miss, did you call?" A smiling stewardess is

towering over me.

“It’s Mrs., actually, and yes, I need some help. You see, I’m on my honeymoon...”

“Congratulations!” she exclaims, including the brute in her felicitations.

“Don’t look at me—I’m not the lucky fella,” he says sarcastically.

“So you’re not sitting next to your husband?” she asks, the smile evaporating from her lips.

“No.” Finally, someone who understands. “And that’s the problem. We were detained at our reception...”

“Here she goes again,” the ogre grumbles, then resumes his out-of-the-window staring.

I ignore him.

“...then the movers had made a mess, and there was the accident on the highway...” I’m babbling; all the adrenaline from today is making me skittish. “So we were late for the check-in, and the only seats left were these two,” I conclude.

“You didn’t check-in online?” the flight attendant asks, perplexed, almost shocked.

Am I the only one who didn’t get the memo that online check-in is the new black?

“I... should have, but I forgot,” I admit, turning scarlet. “With all the details from the wedding to organize, it skipped my mind.”

“Madam, I understand completely,” she says sympathetically. “And I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, but the flight is fully booked.”

“I know, but couldn’t we switch places with some other passengers?”

“I’m sorry, madam, but it’s too late for that.” She puts the last nail in this journey’s coffin. “We’re about to take off, and the seatbelt sign is already on.”

“Oh.” I want to cry. “But this is a six-hour flight!” If it were a one or two hour connection, I wouldn’t care.

“Again, I’m very sorry,” she says with a fake smile that I’m sure she reserves for customers she can’t accommodate. “Can I offer you some complimentary Champagne before we depart?” she asks, the smile never leaving her face.

Free Champagne, wow! At least she’s trying to make up for it. “Yes, thank you,” I say, slightly soothed.

“I will take one too,” chips in the troll.

We both glower at him. The stewardess, because he just gave away her game by pointing out that in first class the bubbly is free for everyone. I, for making me feel stupid that I thought the hostess was giving me a special perk.

“I will be back in a minute,” she says graciously. She shoots a cold look at my neighbor, her smile changing from fake to “I-politely-hate-you.”

As she leaves, the security instructions begin to play in the background. I cross my arms on my chest and look around me only half listening to them.

“...this aircraft has ten emergency exits...”

Bored, I automatically reach into my bag to take a manuscript out—I’m a book editor, I love my job, I’m great at it, and I always carry a manuscript wherever I go. But when my searching fingers can’t find anything, I remember Liam made me promise to leave all work-related books at home. He’s a best-selling author, so we made a deal that he wouldn’t write a single word on our honeymoon if I didn’t edit a single word. So I left all physical book copies home. Only now, we’re trapped on this plane for six hours, miles away from each other, and I don’t have anything to do. I could try to edit something on my phone, I guess, but I don’t want to be sloppy—no author deserves that—and I’m too tired to accomplish anything half-decent, anyway. I even feel too tired to *just* read, which has never happened to me before.

“...illuminated strips on the floor will guide you to these exits...”

Joan, stay positive, I say to myself. The destination matters

more than the journey.

“...in the event of a loss in cabin pressure, oxygen masks will automatically drop from the panel above you...”

Tomorrow I will wake up in a five star resort in a tropical paradise. There’s no need to stress about the plane ride.

“...every seat is provided with a life vest. In first and business class, the vest is located under the armrest. In economy class...”

“Here’s your Champagne, madam.” The stewardess is back with two plastic flutes filled with the sparkling liquid. “Sir,” she adds curtly. “I hope you have a pleasant flight. Let me know if I can assist you in any other way.”

I mutter a thank you. The troll doesn’t even bother. So rude.

“...personal electronic devices may be used during takeoff and landing, providing all transmission functions are switched-off and the device itself is put into airplane mode....”

I take my phone out of my bag. There’s a text from Katy, my maid of honor. She sent me a selfie of us together that she took just before we left. Yes, it was another one of the above-mentioned deferments. I reply with a waterfall of Xoxos and obediently switch the phone to plane mode.

The plane accelerates on the runway and takes off. I calmly sip my Champagne and watch the Chicago skyline disappear beneath us as the plane soars higher and higher in the dark blue sky. Relax, I tell myself. I need to let go of the stress of these past few weeks. After all, from now on this trip can only get better.

Two

The Crash

Several hours later, I am laughing my head off watching *Sixteen Candles*. It's one of my favorite coming-of-age movies. It always cheers me up, even if I've seen it a thousand times and practically know it by heart. I'm glad they had it in the classics section, as I am utterly incapable of sleeping—not for lack of trying—even though it's almost two a.m. I experimented with all the possible settings of my seat. It stretches out so far that it basically becomes a twin bed, but all the excitement of today is making it impossible for me to sleep. I'm like a kid who has eaten an entire box of candies before going to sleep... not going to happen! Liam, on the other hand, is fast asleep. After the takeoff, once the seatbelt sign finally turned off, I wanted to try again to see if we could somehow switch places, but he was already sleeping and I didn't want to wake him.

I concentrate back on the small screen and giggle loudly as Molly Ringwald escapes her horrific grandmother trying to grope her *boobies*. I'm not looking at him, but my mind's eye can clearly see the ogre rolling his eyes with disapproval next to me. Rude, and with no sense of humor. Phooey!

As I watch Sam confessing to her sister that she thinks she's in love, the screen freezes and the text "PA—Public Announcement" scrolls across it.

"Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking." The metallic voice bursts out from my headphones and from the general speaker system of the plane. "We are entering an area of heavy turbulence."

Oh no!

"All cabin service is temporarily suspended, and all

passengers and crew are kindly asked to remain seated with your seatbelts securely fastened.”

If the crew has to sit as well, this has to be serious. Where are we? I peek at the ogre’s screen, which has been on the flight map the entire time, and see that we are flying over the Atlantic Ocean somewhere between Miami and Puerto Rico.

“Please make sure that all your personal belongings are safely stowed in the overhead compartment above you, or under the seat in front of you. Your seat should be in an upright position, and your tray table should be closed. For our passengers in first and business class, please return your TV screens to the compartment under your arm seat. I apologize for the inconvenience. I will inform you when these extra precautions will no longer be necessary. Thank you.”

Perfect! Just perfect. They took away my only comfort. So far, I hate first class! In economy, they get to keep their entertainment. And for what? We’re not even shaking. I put away the TV screen, and since there isn’t a seat in front of me—only a plastic wall and an exit hatch—I carefully close each zip of my Prada hunter bag, buckle the leather straps at the front, and tie its shoulder belt to the seat’s armrest. I wrap the strap around three times and make a couple of knots, just to be sure. The last thing I need is for my bag to fly halfway across the plane, scattering my things all over the place.

I cross my arms over my chest and, for lack of anything better to do, I study the patterns of the plane’s wall in front of me. I have to pee, I suddenly realize with horror. Why didn’t I go before? It’s as if the moment they said I couldn’t get up, I suddenly had to go. I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Excuse me, can I go to the toilet real quick?” I ask a passing steward.

“No, I’m sorry, madam. No one is allowed to stand at this point. I have to go sit, too. You’ll have to wait until—”

“Yeah, I know. Until the seatbelt sign is off,” I interrupt him. “Thank you anyway.”

He smiles and scurries away.

After fifteen minutes, my bladder is about to explode. I could've totally gone to the bathroom without any problems. The plane is trembling a little, but nothing too serious. Why spread the alarmism? All around me, there are only worried faces. I glance back at Liam, he's finally awake and looking at me. Gosh, I love him so much. He gives me a reassuring smile and blows me a kiss, causing my stomach to flutter. Was it the kiss or the air pocket? I'm not sure.

I smile at him, then fix my attention back on the wall in front of me. All this wobbling is making me nauseous. If they don't let us up soon, I'm making a break for the washroom whether the steward likes it or not.

Abruptly, the plane drops down sickeningly fast. Screams erupt around me, my voice among them. I grip the armrests for dear life. Okay, now I am worried. The plane is vibrating badly, making all kind of ominous sounds. Suddenly all the plane's oxygen masks drop down with a loud bang.

This is not a good sign, is it? Aren't the masks supposed to come out only in the case of an extremely serious situation? As if it wanted to answer my question, the plane drops again. I don't waste any more time with philosophical musings. I take the mask and pull it on my mouth, securing the elastic behind my head. Now, besides people screaming, there are a couple of passengers crying, and some others praying.

The plane does another sharp jolt downward, and I'm vaguely aware of a hand pushing my head between my knees. I see a flash of light and hear a loud blasting sound... then everything goes black.

Three

The Island

“Mmm, mwaw,” I yawn drowsily.

A good night of sleep was just what I needed. I feel so much more relaxed now. What better way to wake up than having my newly wedded husband caress my hair as the sunlight gently grazes my skin? Before opening my eyes, I inhale the smell of exotic flowers, tropical fruits, and the scent of the sea. I listen to the birds’ musical tweets and relish the light breeze brushing over my face. Liam must’ve opened the window to let in the fresh air. This is more like it! I had this bad dream where we were on the plane and everything was going wrong. There was that horrible man, then the perfect storm, the explosion... I was caught in this nightmare where the plane crashed. How silly!

I feel a heavy tug at my scalp.

“That’s a bit too harsh, honey... AAARRRRRGHHHH!” I scream as I open my eyes and see a hairy muzzle inches away from my face.

“Eek, eek!” The monkey bares its teeth at me before climbing on a taller branch, protesting loudly. “Ook. Hoo, hoo, hoo.”

A monkey? What is a monkey doing in my hotel room? Did it break in? Isn’t this the five star resort? Where am I?

I try to move my neck. Ouch! It hurts. My neck and shoulders, along with every other muscle in my body, feel sore. My head is throbbing; blood is pounding against my skull. My face is trapped under something plastic-y and yellow. Did I buy a sleep mask? You know, one of those things you put in the fridge before you wear them, that are supposed to regenerate your skin as you sleep? Because I don’t find it very comfortable.

I remove the offending plastic thingy from around my neck,

but the effort is too much for my sore shoulders and I collapse backwards again. Despite the pain, I turn my head to the right—tropical jungle. Then to the left—jungle again. And, finally, upward. My legs are stretched above me, clad in my military green cargo pants—my favorite to travel—and I can see the points of my white sneakers. I'm still wearing the lilac cotton t-shirt with three-quarter sleeves from yesterday too. Why did I go to bed with my clothes on? But I'm not really in bed, am I? No, I'm sitting in some sort of reclining armchair stuck in between tall coconut palms. *That's odd!*

I try to dismount, but something holds me firmly in place. There's a light blue seatbelt tightly fastened around my body. Seatbelt, plane, *crash!* It wasn't a dream!

I unfasten the belt and wiggle sideways to land clumsily on the moist, fern-covered earth about four feet below. My seat, the ogre's seat, and what looks like a chunk of the plane are wedged in between thick tropical vegetation above me. I inspect the ground around the wreckage to see if somebody else is here. I rummage in this tangle of equatorial bushes, but I don't accomplish anything besides adding some scratches to my hands and forearms. I'm glad at least I'm wearing long pants.

It looks like no one else is here; this entire area seems deserted. My heart drops. Where is Liam? What happened to him? I have to find him. I frenziedly search through the underbrush, as if I could find Liam hiding underneath, but after a few minutes, I'm exhausted and stop. I haven't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon, and my body is emotionally and physically worn-out.

I try to calm myself. I spin in a full circle one way, then back around the other way, but I can't see anything or anyone. It's just rainforest all around. Despair gnaws at me. My heart is about to explode from fear and agitation. This jungle is oppressive and I need to get out of here. I spot a small gap among the trees and decide to move in that direction. I fight my way through the waist-

high vegetation and finally, reach a clearing.

As I emerge from the jungle, the most beautiful landscape I've ever seen unfolds before my eyes. I'm standing on an immaculate white beach made of fine, dusty sand. I shade my eyes from the bouncing light of the sun reflecting off the electric blue-green of the ocean.

The island—I'm guessing I'm on an island—is teeming with wildlife. From various birds pecking at the sand—seagulls and some other black and brown feathered kinds I can't name—to small birds chirping happily in the jungle, to an entire colony of brownish monkeys that come in all sizes.

I could dote on this unadulterated, beautifully wild panorama forever. If not for the tiny drawback of the desolation that comes from the lack of any human contamination in this place. Right now, one of those ugly concrete resort monsters, which I usually despise, would warm my heart to the core.

What should I do? I'm hungry, thirsty, and I don't have the slightest idea how to survive in the wilderness. Okay, let's stay calm here. The first thing I should do is check if I'm really alone. I mean, the plane had hundreds of passengers. There must be someone else around. Let's not be overdramatic. Liam is probably just waiting for me around a group of palm trees.

As I move down the beach in search of someone—anyone—I suddenly hear loud crackling noises that don't sound natural. I quicken my pace, excited, and run in that direction. My pulse quickens as I spot the silhouette of a man sitting on the sand. Could it be Liam?

Four

Mr. Ogre

Unfortunately, as I come closer, it becomes clear that the man is not Liam, but the ogre from the plane. He's hunched over a pile of coconuts and seems pretty intent on fumbling with some wooden sticks to open them.

"Heeyyy! Heeeeyyyy!" I call, running towards him, hope fluttering in my chest. I've never been happier to see another human being, or even troll in this case, in my entire life.

"Oh, I see her royal highness is awake," Mr. Ogre says, getting up and watching me run towards him.

"You mean you knew I was here?" I stop dead in my tracks.

"Affirmative."

"And you left me there alone in the middle of the tropical jungle!"

"It's barely some bushes." The troll shrugs noncommittally.

"You let a monkey pick the fleas off my hair!" I accuse him, indignant.

"You have many?" he shoots back with an infuriating smirk, looking at me from under his brows.

"You know what I mean."

"Unfortunately, I do. You're right. I should've warned the poor fella of what he was getting into."

"Ah, ah. Very funny," I retort, sarcastic. "You left me there hanging upside-down. Don't you know it's dangerous to stay like that for too long?"

"Also gives the brain a little extra boost. You look like the type who could use it."

"That's offensive, superficial, and you're the most horrible man I've ever met," I yelp, not able to control the strident pitch

in my voice. “Why didn’t you wake me? I could’ve been dead.”

“You were snoring louder than a running tractor, and I checked your pulse just to make sure. Anyway, I wanted to do a reconnaissance of the island before I had to deal with you as well.”

“For your information, I don’t snore. And what do you mean ‘before having to deal with me as well?’”

“You do snore, and if somebody has told you differently, they were lying to you. A truck driver with sinusitis would not be as loud as you. And by dealing with you, I meant exactly this—having a hysterical bimbo screaming at me for no good reason!”

“Who says, bimbo? Nobody says bimbo anymore, it’s so sexist!”

“Still true.” He shrugs.

“I hate you,” I caterwaul.

“Very mature. Thank you for proving me wrong,” Mr. Ogre says, arching one teasing eyebrow.

I cross my arms and pout. Why am I behaving like a three-year-old?

“Hopefully we won’t have to share each other’s company much longer,” Mr. Ogre continues.

Right, why am I even losing time with this troll?

“Liam. Liiiaaaaamm. Liiiaaaaamm,” I scream at random.

“Eek, eek! Eeeeeek. Ook. Hoo, hoo, hoo.” Only the monkeys seem interested in giving me a response.

“Stop screaming, you idiot. You’ll have the monkeys come down and attack us to protect their territory.”

“Oh, so now you worry about the monkeys. I thought you would get along well with your similars. Liiiaaam. Liiiaaaaamm.”

“He’s not here. Stop screaming! It’s just you and me.” He’s shouting, too.

“Eek. Eek! Eeeeeek. Eeeeeek. Ook. Hoo, hoo, hoo. Eek, eek!”
The monkeys are getting dangerously worked up by all this

yelling.

I ignore them and keep calling.

“Didn’t you hear me? I’ve said he’s not here,” the troll repeats, dropping his work instruments and moving menacingly towards me.

“But that’s impossible, he has to be somewhere around here. Liiiaaam.”

“Do you see a plane lying around?” he roars. “As I said, it’s just you and me!”

I take a good look at the surroundings. On one side, there’s the ocean. On the other, thick tropical vegetation with some hills visible in the background. And we’re standing on the beach in between. We really are on what looks like the perfect desert island from a movie.

“This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.” I pace in circles in the sand, fear gripping my stomach with a painful tug. Where is Liam? What happened to him?

“How long have we been here?” I ask in a soft, polite voice. I don’t have time to waste arguing with this caveman. I need to find Liam.

He checks his watch. “I think the plane crashed at around three or four a.m. I woke up at six with the first light, and now it’s about eight.”

“Good, we haven’t been here long then. Well, it was nice meeting you—I hope I will never see you again.” I turn around and march towards the trees.

“Where do you think you’re going?” The caveman follows me and forcefully grabs my left wrist to hold me back.

“Let go of me!” I command. “I need to find my husband. He could be injured. He may need my help. I have to go find him. Let me go.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he announces with finality. He also grabs my other wrist for good measure.

“You have no authority to say what I can or can’t do!” I protest, trying to break free, but it’s no good. He is so much stronger than I am. I’d have a better chance trying to break free of real metal handcuffs.

“Look around yourself,” he hisses, seething with suppressed anger. “I don’t particularly care for you, but I don’t want to be responsible for your death either. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re on a desert island full of wild animals. You’ve no idea what could await you inside that jungle. And I have a feeling you wouldn’t be so good at surviving on your own.”

“If the jungle was so dangerous, why did you leave me there for two hours?”

“You were asleep and harmless. But if you go around screaming, you could get some of the beasts angry or scare them, and scared animals have a way of protecting themselves.”

“But my husband,” I wail, struggling to get free. “He could be dead.” As I say the words, a stone of fear plants itself in my chest. “I have to find him. I need to know.” I utter those last words between body-shaking sobs.

“Listen—” He eases the grip on my wrists but doesn’t let go. “I understand that you’re worried for your husband, but the best thing you can do for him right now is to stay alive. And going into the jungle on your own would be counterproductive.”

“Then come with me,” I plead.

“I don’t think so. Rescue teams are more likely to find us if we stay here.”

“You selfish bastard... you...” I don’t finish. I just cry.

“Calm down, will you?” he says after a while, his tone slightly softer than before.

“How can you tell me to calm down when you won’t help me find Liam?”

“He isn’t here.”

“How can you say that?” I challenge him.

“I don’t know how much you remember about the crash, but at one point there was an explosion that smashed the plane open right beneath us. Our seats were sucked away. I think we survived only because the winds were so strong they carried us around until the tornado or whatever it was spat us out here on this forsaken island. We were lucky the vegetation is so thick it slowed our fall. Anyway, there are no signs of an explosion around us or anywhere nearby. I think we were separated from the rest of the plane altogether. The pilot was trying to pull off an emergency landing before the fuselage ripped. Chances are your husband is with the wreckage of the cabin somewhere else.”

At this point, I collapse on my knees and let my torso bob up and down with heavy sobs. My arms are suspended over my head as the troll still has a firm grip on my wrists.

“If I let you go, do you promise you won’t try anything foolish?” he asks gently.

I nod.

“All right.” He lets go, and I collapse completely on the sand.

I don’t move. Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the strength to do it. I hear some other distant sounds of wood being smashed, and five minutes later, the caveman is back with me. He hands me an open coconut shell.

“Drink the juice inside,” he orders. “It’s nutritious, and you won’t risk dehydration. Then you can eat the pulp.”

“If I didn’t know better, I would say you were being nice to me,” I tease, summoning some of my usual witty spirit from the depths of my derelict—literally—soul.

“Don’t get used to it,” Mr. Ogre retorts sharply. “When you’re done eating, I need you to get your act together.” He squats down to look me in the eyes. “The situation is not the best, and I don’t want to be stuck on this island with you any more than you do, but if we want to survive, we have to work together. So get whatever it is you have to get out of your system and come join

me when you're over it. There's a lot to do before it gets dark."

I'm tempted to reply "Aye, aye, sir!" but I'm not sure he would appreciate the humor. He doesn't leave me the time to say it, anyway. As soon as he's done speaking, he gets up, turns away from me, and goes back to his makeshift workbench, leaving me alone to deal with my demons.

Oh, Liam! I hope you're safe.

Five

Day 1

“We started off on the wrong foot,” I announce.

After Mr. Ogre left me alone to finish the coconut and deal with my emotional breakdown, I took about half an hour to have a good cry and let some of the tension ease out of me. Now I’m a bit calmer, or at least I’m trying to stay on the positive side of things, and I’ve joined him in the shade at the edge of the jungle. He’s knuckling down on some other coconuts with a makeshift ax.

“Let’s start fresh,” I continue. “If we’re stuck on this island together, we might as well be friendly with each other.”

Mr. Ogre barely lifts his gaze and keeps working on the coconuts. He’s peeling away the outer shell of the nuts, amassing the fibrous straw on one side and the inner, ready-to-be-opened-and-drunk shells on another heap. His sole acknowledgment of my presence is a single grunt.

I choose to ignore his hostile attitude and keep my friendly one. “I’m Joanna Price, by the way, but everyone calls me Joan or Jo. Nice to meet you.”

“Do you mind if I go with Anna instead?”

That’s a weird question. “Um... no, I guess,” I say, a bit taken aback.

“I’m Connor Duffield. Nice to meet you.”

Mmm, Connor Duffield the caveman.

“That’s useful,” I comment, pointing at the ax. It’s made with a sharp metal sheet—from the plane, I assume—and a piece of driftwood. He bound the two together with a brownish vine.

“Yeah, we need to re-use everything we can find. Coconuts are good for now, but we need to find a fresh water source if we

want to make it.”

Fear bites again.

“Do you think we will have to stay here for long?” I ask.

“I have no way of knowing that, do I?” He lifts his gaze toward me again and throws me a look I can’t read.

“But surely the rescue teams will be looking for us...”

He gives me that look again and adds a shrug afterward.

“What? Why are you shrugging?”

“I don’t want to lie to you—our odds aren’t good,” Connor states grimly.

“Explain to me why. Please?” I sit next to him while he keeps working.

“We were sucked out of a plane in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The chances of survival are basically zero—”

“But we’re here. We’re alive.”

“Yeah, but nobody knows that. And in case you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of nowhere. If they arrange a search team—and that’s a big *if*, considering the circumstances—the probability they will find us are again close to nothing. We are the classic needle in the haystack.”

“So why do you even bother to *try* to survive if that’s what you think?” I’m on the verge of tears again.

“Because I hope sooner or later a ship or the yacht of some rich vacationer will pass by this island and find us.”

“Liam will not give up on me. He will find me.” I refuse to think I will die on this island with this man as my sole human company for the rest of my days. I have to be strong and wait for Liam. He will come for me. That is if he’s not just on the other side of the island. I haven’t given up on the idea that the rest of the plane could be somewhere not too far away.

“So do you think we will find it?” I ask.

“Find what?” Connor repeats, perplexed.

“The water.”

“Ah.” He pauses. “The monkeys are here, and that’s a good sign. If they can survive, it means there’s fresh water on the island.”

“So should we go search into the jungle?” It could be the perfect excuse to search for Liam.

He looks at me sharply. Like he’s heard that last comment from inside my head. But if he guessed what I was thinking, he doesn’t let on. He just says, “Easy, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid, or a kiddo, or a bimbo for that matter,” I burst out again. This man has the power of getting on my nerves as quick as lightning. “At least I have the decency to call you names only inside my head!”

He stops working and stares at me intently. For a moment I’m scared he’s about to slap me, but instead, he throws back his head and roars with laughter.

“I’m happy to see you’re enjoying yourself,” I say acidly.

“I will give you that, Anna—you’re funny,” he mocks me in between chuckles.

“I wish I could say the same,” I sulk. When he’s done snickering, I add, “so, if you don’t want to go into the jungle, what do we do now?”

“The first thing you should do is find or make some sort of hat and cover that pretty head of yours. The sun is mild now, but in an hour or so it will be scorching.”

“I can make a hat. I learned how to make one out of palm leaves when we were on vacation in Florida. Liam wanted to go jet skiing, but I didn’t care to jump on one of those monsters, so I went to the hat workshop at our resort.”

“Good for you,” Connor replies, unimpressed. “Go get started.” He’s probably happy he’s found a way to get rid of me. “Cover yourself up as much as you can. It’s good you’re wearing long pants. Even if you get hot, don’t take them off.”

I snort. “As if.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

I mentally take note to add cockiness to his many “positive” traits.

“If you come across things that could be useful or that came from the plane, pile them up,” Connor the Caveman continues with his list of directives. “We need to make an inventory of what we have; see where we’re at before we go into the vegetation.”

I nod. “Got it.”

Even if he is an arrogant troll, I’m okay with him taking charge. He seems to know what he’s doing, and he’s definitely more of an expert at this survival thing than I am.

“Take another coconut,” he adds, opening one and passing it to me. “You’ll need the fluids.”

“Thanks.” I take it from him.

“And I made this for you.” Mr. Ogre also hands me a small dagger made in the same fashion as the ax. “It’s not as good as a real knife, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Oh, ok. Thank you,” I say, surprised and a bit worried. “Do you think I’ll need to use it?”

“Well, if you want to cut palms—”

“Ah right, sure.” I was already imagining myself fighting to the death with tribes of cannibal savages.

“If the monkeys get aggressive, don’t you try to stab them or fight with them. Just run in the water—they don’t like it, and they won’t follow you there.”

“How come you’re such an expert on monkeys?”

“It’s basic knowledge. Just do as I say, will you?”

“Mmm, ok,” I agree, shifting weight from one butt cheek to the other while sipping at my coconut.

“Something else I can do for you?” He raises one cocky eyebrow at me.

Thank goodness I don’t care for dark hair or brown eyes, I tell myself. “Do you think the monkeys *will* get aggressive?” I ask.

“Macaques are not dangerous per se, and they’ll hardly kill you, but they’re territorial and they bite. Even the smallest bite could get infected, and since we’re not exactly high on medical supplies, it could get nasty.”

“I will keep that in mind. See you later.” I wave goodbye as I get up to walk toward our “landing” site.

“And stay in the shadows. The last thing I need is for you to get sunstroke,” he shouts after me.

“I will,” I yell back, not turning around. Connor the Caveman, you worry too much.

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