

## **Paradise**

### **Part 1 - Arrival**

When the engine finally sputtered to a stop, its choking and wheezing silenced, I let out a silent sigh of relief. Past the windscreen in front of me, the plane's propeller began to slow down. The cockpit's rumbling and rattling ceased.

Beside me, the small plane's pilot grunted and reached for his door handle. He struggled with it for a few seconds, swearing under his breath, before finally kicking the door open.

How in the world had I been convinced to ride in this death-trap?

Rust and dents and flaked paint covered every surface of the plane. The seats were torn and ragged, the windscreen and windows stained yellow. The thing belonged in a junkyard somewhere, not in the air.

Still, we'd made it.

I'd made it.

Through the yellow tint, I looked out at my surroundings.

Tropical trees on either side of the dirt runway, a shack on one end of the stretch. The sky - from what I could tell - was a vibrant blue, only a handful of white clouds marring the otherwise continuous clearness. There was a mountain in one direction, but no other land features beyond the tropical forest.

My home for the next six months.

The plane's pilot - his name was Hud, if I remembered right - circled around his flying death-machine until he was standing outside the passenger side door. My door. He spent another few seconds struggling to get this one open too, which was just enough time for me to notice a car driving down the runway towards us, a cloud of dirt-dust following it.

Hud helped me out of the plane, fetched my backpack from a little cargo area behind the seats.

When the car - a fairly modern-looking pickup truck - came to a halt near the plane, Hud gave it a nod. Then the old pilot turned away, began walking in the direction of the shack I'd seen. No 'goodbye' or 'good luck' or anything.

A man emerged from the truck.

Bulky, with broad-shoulders and a grizzled face. Lots of stubble, buzz-cut hair, muscled beyond all reason. And shirtless.

He was wearing standard issue firefighting pants. Black, fire-resistant material with florescent yellow rings around the ankles. Suspenders rose from the waist, looping over the man's bare shoulders. On his feet, I noted, were the same type of boots I'd been issued in my last job. Flame-retardant, with protections against toxic and chemical fires. High-quality stuff.

"Alice McMorran?" The man asked, voice gruff but friendly as he approached.

"Ali," I smiled, holding out a hand. "And you must be-"

"Chief," the man grinned. "Or 'Boss'. Whichever you like. Not much of a welcoming party, I know. The rest of the lads are eager to meet you, but they didn't want to sit in back."

He gestured over his shoulder at the pickup truck.

"Gets real toasty back there."

The man stretched out his huge arms, looked around at the wilderness with a wide grin.

"Welcome to paradise!"

"Fuel is precious here," Chief was saying, eyes on the road ahead. "We only get shipments once a month, and a lot of that is supplies for the research centre. So we only use the fuel we do have when it's needed."

"Like picking me up from the airstrip?"

"Of course! Have to make a good first impression, don't we? The station itself is powered by solar panels, with backup generators in the basement. The bosses up top were thinking about connecting up all the settlements on one grid, have the whole island powered by the research centre's generators - real powerful high-tech ones, they are. But they decided against it. Too much work and cost to justify. So we're stuck with what we have for now."

"How many settlements are there?" I asked, embarrassed by my lack of information.

I should've been told more before coming here, but the corporation in charge of all this was very hush-hush about it. All I knew was that there was a research base, and that the island had a fire station with a mouth-watering contract.

I'd make more here in six months than I'd see in ten years working at a typical, city-based fire station.

"Counting ol' Hud's strip and the station itself? Six. There's the research centre on the island's east coast, and a forward research base in the heart of the jungle. On the west coast, there's the locals - a fishing community and a farming village. The station is near the centre of the island."

"How come?" I asked, eyes sucking in as much of the surroundings as they could. Was that a *monkey*? It was gone too fast for me to be sure I hadn't imagined it. "Isn't our assignment to the research centre? Why put the fire station so far from there?"

Besides me, Chief smirked.

"The eggheads at the centre are real big on protocol. In the fifteen years it's been operating, there hasn't been a single fire there they couldn't take care of themselves. Think of the fire station as more of a 'good will' project for the locals. We're far enough away from their settlements that they can forget we exist, but close enough to help out in a pickle."

Ahead of us, a building emerged out of the jungle. The dirt road, bumpy and rocky until now, smoothed out as we neared the concrete building.

"Here we are," Chief said. "Home sweet home."

"How often does the station have to help the locals?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. Hopefully Chief wasn't getting annoyed with the constant questions.

"Over the last years," The man hummed, seeming to not mind my interrogation one bit. "Maybe three times. Four, if you count the cat stuck up a tree. Dent almost broke his neck tryin' to fetch that furball. Still has the scars 'n' all."

I opened my mouth, didn't know quite how to respond to *that*, closed it again.

"Easiest assignment you'll ever get," Chief said knowingly. "As long as you don't mind the heat too much. The next six months will fly by, trust me."

My room was, in a word, 'tiny'. Before today, it'd been a supply closet in the station. Barely large enough to fit a bed inside and definitely not big enough for anything else.

Still, it was more appealing than the alternative.

The station had a single room for the rest of the firefighters. A sleeping quarters with bunk beds and cots and posters of naked woman on the walls. Every other firefighter in the station was a man.

Much as I was looking forward to meeting and working with my new colleagues - I was no stranger to a male-dominated workforce - the thought of having to share a room with them all wasn't one I was keen on. Small as this closet sleeping room was, I was happy to have it.

The men had even been thoughtful enough to install a mirror on one wall for me. A full-body mirror that revealed a very frazzled and tired woman.

Black hair standing out at all angles, dried and frayed and wild. Hopefully the guys here weren't the 'shower gel cleans everything' types and had some shampoo laying around. My skin was sticky with sweat, pink from the sun. Living in a tropical place like this

for half a year was bound to give me a decent tan.

When I'd left the hotel this morning, headed to the airport for my perilous flight, I'd been wearing a plaid shirt over a white tank top. The shirt, damp with sweat and smelling awful, was the first thing to come off. I peeled it off my body, tossed it onto the bed. My jeans and tank top clung to my skin uncomfortably, the fabric of my underwear feeling particularly gross. Boyshorts and a reinforced sports bra.

I wanted nothing more than to take a shower, put on some clean clothes. But there was no time for that. I had to report back to Chief in a few minutes.

Plus, I didn't even know where the showers were.

I dumped my bag on the bed, tidied my hair as much as I could with my hands, stopped to catch my breath and calm my nerves.

A faint fragrance in the air caught my attention.

Sweet and calming, the scent floral. It was unlike anything I'd ever smelled before. A totally new scent.

I looked up, saw a small ventilation grate.

There was airflow coming from there. Cool, scented air entering through that grate.

Huh. That was odd.

Why did a supply closet need ventilation?

I shrugged the thought away, closed my eyes and just enjoyed the flowery smell for a few seconds.

Then, calm and ready, I left the room.

"Right," Chief grunted. "Introductions."

Apart from Chief, there were three other men at the station. All of which were standing behind him.

"Dent," Chief said, pointing his thumb at a tall, bald man with what looked like a small dent in his head and a row of thin scars on one cheek. "Dumb as a bag of shit, but good at following instructions."

"As long as the instructions aren't too complicated," one of the other men chimed in.

"Canner," Chief pointed to the man. "He's in charge of building maintenance. You can thank him for any leaks or holes you find around the station."

The man bowed his head, smirked.

"Lastly, this twig is Sparks. Engineer and electrician. We're all waiting for the day he'll zap himself so we can get a competent engineer in instead."

All three of them were big guys, tall and muscular. Sparks might've been the least bulky of the bunch, but by normal standards he was still well-built. That was expected, though. Firefighting was strenuous work that required strong, fit bodies.

"Lads, this is the newbie I told you about. Ali. She'll be replacing Bimb- replacing *Bethany* for the next few months."

"Nice to meet'cha," Sparks said.

"Howdy," Dent grumbled.

All three gave me a once over. Some more subtly than others. Eyes roaming my figure, lingering on my chest. Sparks gave a nod of appreciation while Canner pretended he hadn't been looking at all.

Also expected. It'd been the same with my last place. It wasn't something to worry about. They'd learn to respect me quickly enough, would see me as much more than a new, attractive woman living with them.

As they took their time scoping me out, I used the opportunity to look around the station's common room.

It was on the second floor. Right above the garage - where a big, red fire truck was waiting. In fact, there were two holes in the floor with old-school poles extending through them. Quick access to the garage in case of emergencies.

There were sofas too, a radio, a television, and what looked like a fridge - filled with snacks and drinks, most likely.

"Now that's over with," Chief said, snapping my focus back to him, "lets get you geared up."

The other three made themselves scarce as Chief handed me a box full of clothing. I opened it up, looked down at the bulky uniform with a wide smile. There was nothing quite like receiving firefighting clothes. Like I was being handed pure responsibility and trust.

On top of the pile of folded clothing were a pair of boots, same as the ones Chief and the others were wearing - only in my size. Under the boots was a heat-blocking cowl to wear under a helmet - not that there was a helmet in this box.

Then came the uniform's jacket. A bulky black coat with fluorescent yellow strips over its wrists and waist and shoulders and chest.

Underneath that, I found the trousers with suspenders.

And, under those, a few smaller items. On one side, a pair of fire-resistant gloves and socks. On the other... What was that?

I reached down, picked up what looked like a black thong.

Sure enough, that's exactly what it was.

A black thong with the word 'HOT' printed over the crotch.

And, still in the box, was a matching black bra with little flame symbols over the cups.

"Standard issue," Chief said, watching me closely. "Fireproof undergarments. Due to the limited number of us, you'll be expected to wear your uniform at all times. You don't have to wear the jacket or cowl or gloves, but they must *always* be nearby. You understand?"

I looked up at him, that odd floral scent filling my nostrils. Slowly, I nodded my head. It made sense.

"Good," Chief let out a breath, smiled. "Go back to your room, change into your uniform, then come back here. I'll give you a tour, run you through everything. You'll get used to how this place works in no time."

I began moving, paused, looked to Chief.

"Sir?" I said, a question pushing its way to the forefront of my mind. One I just needed to know the answer to. "That flowery smell... What is it? It was in my room too."

He looked at me for a long moment, sizing me up.

"That," he said finally, "is something the research centre made from some local plants," then he grinned. "The locals love it. Give it a day or two, and you won't even notice it's there."