



Reluctant Press presents:

By My Choice



Nick Lorange

AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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By My Choice

By Nick Lorance

As I read the diary. I am struck by the fact that almost everything that has happened to me was by my own choice. I watch the sea break against the shore, hear the cry of birds, and my mind goes back...

I was always small. Slim, barely five feet five inches tall, I was the despair of my father. He had wanted someone his size, six feet three, a linebacker in college. Instead he got a boy who read, sang and danced. I had grown my hair long in rebellion against him; it hung to just below my shoulders. It looked fine, swirling with me in dance class as I lifted the girls in ballet.

I graduated high school in the upper fifth of the class and hoped to go to college, but my father disagreed. If I went for a business degree, he would pay

for it. The theatrical degree I wanted would have to be paid for by me.

I considered the options. Business bored me but I would have to work two jobs just to pay for tuition. My mother convinced him to let me see some of the world, so he sprung for a flight to Australia, and a cruise among the Indonesian islands aboard a small liner named the *Jakarta Queen*.

The path of your life can be changed by something small; say a mine laid before you were born...

The explosion lifted the liner, breaking her back in the same moment. The ship slammed back down and began sinking in seconds.

All I remembered was the blast. One moment I was standing at the rail, watching the sun set, then the fore part of the ship lifted even as the stern did. I was scrambling for a handhold as the stern lifted almost vertical.

I let go and fell screaming into the water. Something smacked me in the face and I lost consciousness.

I don't know how long I was in darkness. All I knew was that I was wet, cold, and clinging to something. It was a flat hatch like they use to seal cargo holds. What had caused it? I wondered. There were no wars going on in the area, but historically a lot of ships are still sunk by mines from World War I even after almost a century.

In this region however, it was more likely one from WWII. With great effort, I climbed up on the hatch. As large as it was, I felt I could stand, and I did so carefully. There was nothing in sight as far as the horizon. I was alone with no food or water. A pity I could not turn it over; with the ridged edge up, I would have somewhere to catch water if it rained. I cataloged what

I had for survival gear. My clothes, the pants shredded down the back from sliding down the deck, so torn my ass hung out; a shirt that was a bit ripped but serviceable. My wallet was gone and I wanted to curse between laughing. I'd had about five hundred dollars in it. Enough to replace my wardrobe, for a good meal and a taxi to the embassy.

If there were a store, or a restaurant, or a taxi or an embassy.

I crawled along the edge. There was a rope that went down into the depths and I caught it, pulling it up. The end of the rope had a heavy weight attached to it; the rope was thirty feet long. I stood, paying the rope out as I did. There was five feet more rope than there was from the point it connected in the center of one side, and I considered how to do this. I lifted the end, wrapping around my waist, then leaned back as hard as I could. It lifted, but not enough. Only the luck of having the wind lift it would help. Maybe I could fashion a fishhook to catch something to eat, but fishing with a half-inch manila line is almost ridiculous.

I spied something floating nearby, and grabbed the rope. It looked like one of those aluminum suitcases or a camera case. Whatever was in it might keep me alive a little longer. I cast the rope time and again, trying to get it over the case. Finally I succeeded; the weight on the other end dropped into the depths, the rope showing it closer. Finally I could reach it.

It was a little heavy, but my mind filled it with sports bars and bottled water, sandwiches and bottled tea. I caught the latches and flung it open.

Clothes, a girl's clothes. I pawed through it frantically. Two dresses, a skirt and blouse combination. Lady bras and panties, garter belts, half a dozen pairs

of stockings, a single piece bathing suit and near the bottom, a cache of candy bars and a makeup kit. I didn't know who the woman had been, but I wished her soul well as I stuffed a candy bar in my mouth. I found a passport, and flipped it open.



Lisette DuBois, Dutch national, seventeen years old.

I looked at her for a long time as I chewed that manna from the sea. Why had she been traveling here? I know the Islands had once been Dutch, but that was before WWII. Now they were the sprawling nations of Micronesia and Indonesia.

Well, she was gone, and I was still alive. I took everything out of the case, laying it out neatly. The clothes I had just enumerated, a Qipao, what westerners called a cheongsam, and a summer dress. There were also stockings, underwear, candy, the makeup case and a diary with a pen. I almost threw the last two away, but I could use them. I could record what happened to me; if I did not survive, there would be a record of what remained of my life. Last but not least was some suntan lotion with sunblock and sunglasses.

Day 2

I awoke with a horrible sunburn on my back and ass. The clothes might cover, but not well enough to avoid that. I considered trying to lay on my back if I slept again, but the sheer agony of trying the position made me scream aloud. I considered Lisette's clothes. Except for the ankle-length cheongsam, there was nothing that would cover all of me and even that left my arms exposed. I ripped away the pants, removed the shirt. I hadn't seen how bad the back of it was. It was in worse tatters than the pants. I looked at the cheongsam. It would cover me better than what I had on. With the suntan lotion and sun block, I could cover up enough to avoid more sunburn.

I opened the buttons, and slid it on. It was an odd feeling, satin and silk against my skin, but I was too tired hungry and thirsty to care. I buttoned it back up, feeling it snug against my body. The lotion went on, the cooling balm a bit of relief from the burning sensation.

Still nothing in sight. My lips felt chapped, and I dug in the makeup case. No lip balm, nothing but lipstick and lip gloss. I read the label. Moisturizing lip stick. I considered, then shrugged. It wasn't like there were hordes of people watching. Using the mirror, I carefully applied it. I fashioned a shade from the dress so the sun would not pound so hard on me. My arm was tight around the case as I ate another candy bar and fell asleep.

I awoke, feeling rain falling on me. I rolled over, wincing at the pain, and saw heavy clouds headed for me. I grabbed the case, dumped it out, then flipped it upright as suddenly the shower became a pounding downpour. I used my shirt to sluice it across the hatch, cleaning away the salt, then frantically began to squeeze the precious liquid into my only container. I kept working at it until suddenly the storm was past. I looked at the case and my mind began to calculate. The open part was 20 inches wide, 36 inches long, four inches deep. 2880 cubic inches. Over eleven quarts of water.

As I cupped my hands and drank, I knew my math teacher in high school would have been proud of me. I stopped after a few minutes, waiting for an hour before I drank again. I didn't want to waste any of it by throwing it back up. I drank again, and stopped after about two quarts. Then I closed the case firmly. I didn't want it tainted by salt or evaporating away.

Day 3.

Still nothing to see. I drank and ate another candy bar. I only had one left. The shade and long dress protected my skin, though I had to slather the suntan lotion and sunblock on my exposed arms, legs, and face. This time I used the lip gloss. It had a nice flavor, and I found myself licking the strawberry gloss. I could almost picture what I looked like from a distance. From that range an observer would not see my features, only my outline. A young woman lazily sunning herself on a flat platform, using her suitcase as a pillow, and another dress as an umbrella. I fell asleep as the sun went down.

Day 6.

No food for two days. I felt my stomach grumble. Another rain shower filled my container. Right then I would have traded all of it for a hamburger and fries. I watched the horizon, not wanting to move. There was a bar of darkness there. I lifted my hand, using it as a shade. An island? Maybe a larger storm. The wind was picking up, and I looked around. No, behind me was the storm, and it was huge.

The Island

Time passed as I lay there. I saw a covering of tightly plaited palm leaves above me, a man's face, then nothing. Later I saw a petite woman looking at me, patting my shoulder, saying, "You be good girl."

I remember her four times. Each time I remember something being shoved into my rectum, the feeling of heaviness in my belly, then something plugging me

like a sink. I was rolled onto my back as my stomach was gently rubbed. Then, much later, I heard what might be birdsong as the sun rose. I was walked to a trench, and evacuated my bowels.

When I finally came to, I was on a narrow mattress of cotton stuffed with sweet smelling grass and herbs. I was in a shift of some kind, and the roof was still palm fronds. The man I had seen in my brief times of consciousness came in, setting down a woven bucket. He saw me looking at him and hunkered down. He was a little taller than I was, with a wide flat face, and almond eyes in that dusky countenance.

“Feel better?” He asked. I nodded. He got a clay cup, lifted my body gently, and held the cup to my lips. Refreshing cool water ran down my throat. I drank greedily. It wasn’t lukewarm like the water that had been in the case. He lowered the cup, then lay me back down. “You sleep long time. I get food.”

I lay there, looking through the doorway into the camp beyond. Men in pants and shirts moved about, and women in shifts like what I wore carried wood or beat fruit into paste and grain into meal.

The man returned and held a cup. I didn’t recognize the taste of the juice, but my body arched up. I was mewling with hunger as I drained that cup and two more. Fried and mashed fruit followed by dried fish was pressed between my lips, and I devoured it all. The man gently laid me down, and I looked at the roof above again. A young woman came in, hunkering down beside the bed.

“Where... where am I?” I whispered.

"Island, Mata kail." the man said. "Do not know English." He drew a J shape with a round top. "Shape like this."

I looked at it. Something was causing me to have problems thinking. "A metal piece to catch fish? A fishhook?"

"Yes. Named because island is same shape."

"Natives?" I asked. Even as I did, I could see that wasn't true. Among those outside here were Caucasians, light-skinned Asians, and those as dusky as the two who were with me out there. Only the women were homogeneous, all dusky like the woman by me. I lifted my arm. After my ordeal, my skin was as dark as theirs.

"No. Prison. Special secret prison," the man told me. "So secret we all die before it be revealed." He touched his chest, then pointed at the men. "If this is no secret, we all die."

"The women?" I had noticed that the women had been ignored.

"They from local tribes. Three on islands east, west, and south." He pointed so I knew the directions. "They allowed to trade with this island. We trade them fish fruit and pearls." He motioned toward the silent woman beside him. "They trade women."

"Slave?" I asked.

He grinned, shaking his head. "Some stay for long time, some for short. All can leave. But men stay here or die."

"But I'm not one of their prisoners!" I protested.

"No matter. They know you man, you become prisoner. Good you dress like girl."

I must have looked confused. "Three day ago, new girls come, old girls leave. You in here. When you go outside, old girls think you new girl. New girls think you old girl. They see you, they see girl."

"But who rescued me?"

"I rescue." The man thumped his chest. "See you wash ashore. Bring you here. Only Luha and I know you here. Others just think one girl is sick." He motioned to the woman. "She help me. I doctor, Bahan."

I looked at them. Luha was a bit shorter than I was, with long black hair falling in a sheet to the center of her back. Her posture, sitting on her heels, back straight, spoke of fine muscle control.

"My name is Michael Conner. My friends call me Miko." I looked at Luha. "She is a nurse?"

"No nurse," he replied. "She belong to Sarang, one of the men. She help if I have patient."

"How would they know I was here if I am a man?" I asked.

"Every morning they send helicopter. Men must come out and stand on beach, wide enough that we can be counted. Even sick men must be there. If count no match, they send bigger helicopter, soldiers. They search. If still no find, they go to villages. They have picture of all men here, they search. They find man in village?" He jerked his thumb across his throat. "Him, all people they catch. They all die. People in village know this. They will tell to save lives of children."

I considered this in my still woozy state. I could escape dressed as a woman, but only until someone knew I wasn't a woman. "Could I get to the other villages?"

He considered. He began sketching on the ground. A dot, then three dots almost like an equilateral triangle. "Us, other villages," he said. A larger dot. "Timor has airport, but only for inside country. No passport, no plane." Another larger oval. "Java," he said. "Airports, embassy." Then he made an upside down V shape off to one side. "Australia, 700 miles." He tapped Timor. "Four hundred miles," Java, "Eight hundred miles. Some schooners come this area," he circled the small islands, "But stop only at villages. No come here except government ship. Forbidden. Ship come, crew join us here." He leaned back.

"Get to island can do, sure. Get ship, maybe, but ship come when? No like bus with schedule. Longer you stay, more chance village tell soldiers. Get ship, they find you man, maybe they give to soldier, maybe they throw you in ocean. Maybe they cut throat, eh?"

"Be girl, no one notice, but on ship maybe girl what they need, yes? Need protector, man who say, 'This my girl.'" Bahan considered. "Same here. If you no pick man, man pick you."

"But I'm a man!"

He sat for a long time, looking at me. "Among your people you have men who love other men?" I nodded slowly. "Women who love other women?" I nodded again. "There are some in land who are born man, but feel like girl here." He touched his chest, then his head. "They dress like girl, act like girl, with women they are girl. But with man, they act like girl. Man sees you in woman clothes, he think you one of those."

My mind was fuzzy. If I dressed like a girl, I was a girl? It didn't make sense.

“Men here, some like those who are girl-boy. Even if he not like you, he know one who will. As long as you patient, you safe. But you be well in short-short time, and will have to help the women. Before too long, man try to take you. You fight, he think you tease. Maybe rape.”

So I could hide until someone decided to bend me over. I didn't want to do this, but I didn't have a choice. “I will think on this.”

“Good. Sleep and rest. If men speak, women speak, you no understand. They think you stupid.” He tapped his head. “But you learn quick, only speak this and Malacca. You learn.”

I nodded. He patted me on the shoulder and left.

Luha leaned over, brushing my hair away from my face. “I brush hair?” she asked. I nodded.

She turned me around, and began to brush my hair with long luxuriant strokes. As she did, she murmured in her own language, comments about my hair, maybe just chattering as some women did. When she was done, she lay me back down. I could tell by the sun that it was near noon, but that didn't stop me from falling asleep.

I came awake to music and singing. The sun had set, and fires lit the clearing. Men and women sat around, laughing, joking, dancing. The girls were getting food for the men, bringing it over, serving them, then returning with food for themselves. It looked like any group of people at a picnic. A man drew a girl to him, the girl hesitant.

Then they kissed. From where I lay, I was a voyeur watching the intimate moment. Would that be me in a short time? Being kissed by some man who thought I

was a girl, or didn't care as long as I acted like one? Luha delivered some food to a husky man, slapping away his hands playfully, motioning toward where I was. Then she went back to the pot, setting another portion, and walked toward the hut where I lay.

She handed me the wooden bowl and bread. "Eat, grow strong," she said. Then she left me to run back down to the fire. The man she had been teasing stood, and she leaped into his arms, giggling as he nibbled at her neck and kissed her. I ate, the food was delicious. I watched the domestic scene with wonder. My father had always liked the National Geographic magazines, and I had seen many wonderful things from around the world. This could have been a village in any poor Third World country. Nothing marked them as prisoners and girls hired for 'short time'.

What did 'short time' mean? A month? Three? Six? I would have to ask Luha or Bahan. I set the bowl aside, and rolled on my stomach watching out the door.

The couples were mostly eating still, but some had begun serious necking sessions, unmindful of those around them. Then the couples began moving off into the jungle, into the huts. Luha and her man were wrapped around each other, like two pythons trying to crush each other. She lifted from him, saying something softly, then motioned toward my hut. The man tried to pull her back down, but she pulled away. She ran to one of the huts, then came toward the hut and entered again.

She had a bladder of some kind, heavy with liquid. She attached a nozzle. Then she lifted my shift, a lubricated finger running into my ass.

"What are you doing?" I asked trying to pull away.

She held me down at the waist. "Help you sleep. Help you be good girls" she said. She took the nozzle and slid it up into me. Then she turned, taking a round polished piece of wood about four inches long, shaped like a teardrop with a wide flat piece on its bottom. She spoke to me as if gentling a child, then she moved out of my sight.

I felt something warm and oily injecting itself into my bowels. The bladder hadn't been that big, maybe a pint and a half of liquid. Then she picked up the teardrop. I saw that it was about an inch and a half thick at the widest point before it necked down to less than half an inch where it met the base. Before I could protest, I felt it slide up, corking me like a wine bottle.

She rolled me over, gently kneading my stomach. I felt full, but not uncomfortably so. After a few moments of her massage, I began to feel my mind drifting.

"You want to be good girl, I do every night," Luha said, her massaging hands running over my abdomen in a relaxing pattern. She patted my cheek. "Stay in all night, I take you to empty at dawn." She kissed my cheek, rolling me back over so my head was on the pillow again. She smiled. "With Luha help, you be good girl."

The Village

I felt gentle hands lift me. I opened my eyes and Luha smiled. "Come, before others wake up."

I found I could walk, though my legs were wobbly. Luha took my arm, leading me toward a trench dug in the ground. From the stench I could tell it was a public latrine. A pole stood beside the trench, and she maneuvered me until I was standing with my back to the trench. "Bend down," she said, hunkering down as she

had when I first met her. I did as she bid, and she reached under me.

The cork popped out, and I felt a flow of liquid with a harsh licorice-like stench flood from me. I gasped as the feeling of being full vanished. I was still calm, distressingly so. She handed me some leaves; I wiped, dropping them into the trench. I was able to walk better by the time we reached the hut. She led me in, then headed down to the coals of the fire. She began adding wood, and soon a fire burned brightly. She began pouring water into a cauldron, and began pounding grain with a giant mortar and pestle.

Other women began to join her, and they divided up the work. Luha allowed another girl to take over the mortar and pestle as she took a large bag and immersed it in the now steaming water. As one began to make a batter of the ground grain, another added fresh grain. Others sliced meat, putting it on skewers to hang over the fire. Another pulled coals onto a stone in the edge of the fire. She picked up handful of the dough, slapping it back and forth between her hands. Then she swiped the coals away, dropping flat hand-formed cakes onto the stone.

They chattered like magpies. I didn't understand the language, but some of the gestures were obvious. One was joking about what she and her man had done the night before with gestures so obvious that I was soon blushing.

Then the men began to come down. The women served them as they arrived; the women joined their men as they sat to eat, juggling position like a troop of professional dancers. Bahan came down, and Luha handed him a plate and cup. She set aside another por-

tion, handing that to Bahan as well, then she served her own man and joined him.

Bahan came up to the hut, and handed me the plate and cup. He sat beside me, as I ate.

“You well enough to go to trench with little help. Tomorrow you well enough to help. Luha take you to hot spring for bath today.”

I nodded, my mouth full. I swallowed. “But I was not filthy yesterday. How did that happen?”

“While you unconscious, Luha bathe you.”

I pictured it, laying unable to resist as her hands ran over my body as they had last night. It was a suddenly erotic picture, but for some reason I didn’t get hard at the thought. But then again, if a nurse gave you a sponge bath, would you be aroused? You should be, but I wasn’t.

No, that isn’t quite correct. I was aroused, but didn’t have any physical sign of that arousal. Maybe I wasn’t well enough for that yet.

We finished eating and sat enjoying our tea and a companionable silence. Bahan cocked his head, and I heard the whining sound of a helicopter in flight. Bahan set down his tea. Outside, the men were standing, walking toward my right. I stood following Bahan and watched as the men got into two ragged lines on the beach.

One moment, nothing, then the helicopter was there. It was a Hughes design, probably the Defender, considering the chain gun beside the left door. Two uniformed men sat in the cockpit, one of them aiming a pair of binoculars. The aircraft turned, the gun an obvious threat, then hovered over the lagoon. For a long time, nothing happened. The men stood there, hands at

their sides, wind whipping their hair. There were twenty of them, I realized. Twenty men sentenced to a life in obscurity.

The helicopter lifted, flying toward us, and a small parachute with something hanging below it dropped to the sand. As it turned and now raced away to the west, one of the men walked over, opening the package. The others gathered around, and they talked. Then the men walked back into the clearing. They began gathering axes and saws and odd tubes. Then each of them grabbed his woman, kissed her and they all went off into the trees.

Bahan came over to me. "Government wants some trees cut down. Core samples. We do, they send ship to pick up."

"Why?"

"Very valuable trees. Rare, only found here, these four islands. Cut ten, maybe twenty trees a year. They want two from here. Core samples," he paused. "Our purpose. No matter."

"All this effort for two trees and core samples?"

"They also pick up nutmeg and vanilla bean." He pointed at a dozen large baskets. "We collect every day. As we fill basket, we put there, easy for helicopter to see. When enough, they tell us they come. Core samples, they pick up every week."

"When they do?"

"We secret, remember?" Crew of ship told we very shy natives. We hide, they no look for us. They look, they end up here, yes? They leave things we need. Medicine, tools, tobacco, some things for women." He clapped me on the shoulder. "You rest one more day. Tomorrow you able to help."

He picked up an army backpack with a red cross on it, then hefted an ax as he walked into the jungle.

Luha came to me, bringing a pair of towels, a natural soft sponge, a loofah sponge, and a bar of sweet-smelling soap.

We walked up the hill, away from where the men had gone. The jungle smelled of yeast like rising bread, mold, flowers, anise and vanilla. Luha told me about the grove of nutmeg trees where they filled the baskets. Vanilla bushes, banana and coconut. Flowers seemed to grow everywhere.

The hot spring was formed from a bubbling of water into a stream that ran into a pool filled by a small spring of cold water so it mixed naturally. Luha sat me down, pulling up my shift. She pulled it over my head, then moved to the spring, swirling her hand until she found the right spot, filling a bucket. She came back, pushed my hair forward over my shoulder, then sat behind me and began washing my back for me. She scrubbed with the loofah, then with the soft sponge. It felt sinfully decadent to have someone do this for me, and I luxuriated in the attention.

“You too white. Need time in sun,” she told me. “After bath, you sunbathe,” she ordered. She took the bucket of water and rinsed my back with it. “Wash front and legs,” she ordered. As I did as she instructed, then she filled the bucket again. I did as she told me. She directed me into the hot spring. “Move until water comfortable.” She motioned left and right.

I stepped in and immediately saw what she meant. Within a few feet, the water went from briskly cool to almost boiling. I found a comfortable spot and relaxed. She stripped, watching me as she washed herself. Her breasts were small but still cute. She noticed my look,

smiling. "Soon you be good girl. No look at other girl like that." I blushed, looking away.

After a time she joined me, resting a little further into the hot water than I. We rested there for a long time before she stretched, those nipples seeming to stretch out. "Now you sunbathe. I make sure you do not sleep and burn."

I climbed out, laying on my front as she massaged oil into my back. "You use, you no burn," she told me, holding up the clay bottle. "You lay there," she said slapping my white ass. After a time, she had me roll over, and she rubbed oil into my front, missing nothing. Even her delicate fingers rubbing oil onto my penis did not cause me to come erect. I should have been worried, I knew, but it wasn't important for some reason.

Finally, hours later, she had me dress again, and we walked back down to the huts. The other women saw me, and giggled. "She Miko," Luha introduced me, then began telling me of the girls. The names ran together in my head; Mahi, Soho, Lanah, Miho and the others. Seventeen girls.

Suddenly, I remembered that morning: twenty men, only eighteen girls.

Eighteen girls, and me.

"Which men do not have girls?" I asked Luha.

She looked at me. "Bahan and Sungah. Girls sometimes do that for Bahan, he kind. But Sungah mean. Girl not like him. When new girls come, none pick him."

"Why doesn't Bahan have a girl?"

“He not ask girls this time. He had girl -Jahala- but she get pregnant, go home when new girls come. Too busy taking care of you. If you no choose, we give him pleasure sometime.”

I felt bad. If the only pleasure I had was the girls that came from another island, I would be irritated at the boy that had lost me that chance, even if I sometimes got laid.

The girls chattered in that same mixture of Indonesian and English I was becoming used to. I was set to work grinding grain for bread. The mortar was a rounded bowl almost eighteen inches across, the pestle a smoothed stone rounded at both ends and a foot long. I had to lift and drive it down in a twisting motion to grind the barley. It was hard work but they left me in silence. Every now and then, one of the girls, Miho I think, would sweep the new flour into a bowl, and another named Sahia would add a handful of grain.

Luha stopped me as the men came down from the forest. I ignored them as the girls handed me the bowl of dough. Luha showed me how to make one of the flat cakes, then I spent minutes making them and handing them to Luha who slapped them on the baking stone until again I was stopped. A plate of food was handed to me, and Luha pointed. “Give to Sungah. Girls give him food, be polite.”

I looked at the man and felt a chill. He was taller than I was, rippling muscles revealed since he had not put his shirt on. He smiled, and I could see the cruelty in that gesture. I took the plate, walked over and knelt as the girls did, holding it out. He took the plate, then I gasped as his hand closed on my wrist. I felt him pulling, and I pulled back. No! I was not going to let him...

Luha came over, touching Sungah's arm. "She no serve Bahan yet," she said.

Sungah glared at her, then leaned back, stuffing food in his mouth. Luha set the plate in my hands. "Give to Bahan."

I stood, walking over to the doctor. He watched me, reaching out as I knelt to offer the food. "Terimah Kasih," he said, taking the plate and eating.

I accepted my own plate and ate. My eyes kept going nervously back and forth between the men. Sungah was a brute, I knew if he decided to use me as a girl, I would be beaten until I submitted. Bahan had many a chance to abuse my body in the last few days, but had never touched me in an unseemly manner that I knew. He had fed me as if I were a child, probably had to wipe me like a baby, and never shown me anything but kindness. I finished my stew, picking one of the red bananas from a stalk that some of the girls had brought. It was like the yellow bananas I was used to, only small and red outside with pink meat. I peeled it and ate.

Sungah's eyes focused as I slipped it into my mouth in dainty bites. I could tell from his look that he was seeing another meat between my lips, and I blushed. Bahan looked when I began, but focused instead on his food. I reached out, pouring a cup of tea. Ignoring Sungah, I went to Bahan, kneeling and presenting it to him as I had his meal. He looked at my face, then leaned forward, taking it. I felt his fingers brush mine, lingering for a moment before moving to take the cup.

"Tea," Sungah demanded. The girls looked at him, but his eyes were on me. Sahia began to ladle out some tea, and he snarled. "No! Miko! Tea!"

The group was silent. I could feel Bahan's eyes, and looked at him. He cocked his head. I could tell he was telling me to be strong. I turned, still kneeling, hands on my knees, looking down. "Tea was offered, Sungah, and refused. So do I refuse," I replied.

He snarled, glaring past me. "She do for you, or I make her do for me," he threatened. Then he stood, shouldered the ax and stormed away into the forest.

I was quivering. One man would guide me gently, another would force me, even if I resisted.

What would I choose?

My Decision

Since I was considered well enough to help by most of the girls, I found myself being dragged into the forest. They spent perhaps a third of their day gathering food for dinner. One girl would tie her ankles together, then squat jump up the trunk of a banana or coconut tree. She would twist a fresh coconut or bunch of bananas, dropping it to the others on the ground. Others gathered cassava so they could make poi in the Tahitian or Samoan manner. I acted as Bahan had mentioned, seeming less bright than I was as they guided me.

I was brought down to the lagoon and we harvested the bounty of the sea. Sea cucumber, fish, sea urchin, all would feed us. The fish were filleted, then hung on racks above the fire to smoke. I was good with a knife and spent two hours gutting the fish and laying the fillets on the rack. The girls accepted me as one of them, meaning, I knew, the men would consider me one.

The rest of their day was spent in diving for pearls. I later discovered that each woman had been chosen

because they were divers in their own villages. Three lines were attached to the raft, those for and aft to trees, the last to the shore to turn a section of the lagoon into a place to dive. I spent the days attaching vines to large stones they used as weights to drop into the depths.

There was a small raft we could use for this; not large enough to escape in, but enough to move the stones; each girl made perhaps 10 dives a day for maybe a hundred oysters in that same day. Every time they brought up from four to ten oysters; as the raft was slowly dragged to the next grid, the girls would be opening the oysters. A good diver might bring up as many as two hundred oysters in a day.

The shell I was told, was valuable for its decorative usages. But they dived not for shell, but for pearls, the smooth gold of the region.

As I cleaned the shell, the oyster for us to eat, I wondered. What would I do? When the men returned, would I be the patient or the girl who as yet had no man?

As the sun began to set, the girls gathered and dinner preparation began. My skill with a knife had me cutting and dicing the meat, other girls taking what I had done along with the raw oysters, adding them to the communal stew. I was a girl doing what I must, and dreading the night when I would be a girl.

As the sun set, the men came back to the camp. I had sliced and diced meat, then I had been returned to grinding flour as other girls made the bread to go with it. Sungah sat, and one of the girls gave him tea. I sipped from my own cup between grinding more flour, feeling his hot eyes on me.

Bahan came down and I realized there was no choice in this matter. Being brutalized, or being cared for. I went to the tea cauldron, ladling a cup, and carried it over to Bahan. I knelt, offering the cup with my eyes lowered. He took it, then knelt, lifting my face with his finger. "Terimah Kasih, Miko," he said. Then he sat.

I blushed. Had I just offered myself to this man?

"Miko, stir the pot," Miho ordered, and I went over and gently stirred the stew pot. We had all added to this feast; banana, coconut, meat, fish, clam, oyster, all of us had made this stew. I was the one that doled out the stew as each girl gathered it for their man. Each took their offering to their man, then their own portion. Soon only three portions remained, my own, one for Sungah, another for Bahan.

I tapped Luha. "Please, for Sungah." I ladled out a generous portion for the one I refused. As Luha carried it, I put another portion in a bowl. Before Sungah could complain, I went to Bahan, kneeling. I held out my offering and he took it.

"Sit with me," he asked rather than commanded. I went back, feeling Sungah's furious gaze as I served myself. I could feel his attention become a furious flame as I turned, kneeling beside Bahan.

"May I?" I asked. Bahan moved aside, and I slid up beside him. We sat in companionable silence as we ate. Across the fire I could feel Sungah's angry gaze. I leaned in, feeling Bahan's warmth against my flesh, feeling his strength fill me as I submitted.

Dinner ended, empty dishes, replete diners. I took my own and his plate to Sahia who would clean this night.

I felt Bahan's arm on my shoulders, saw the other women take the dishes for cleaning. Bahan put his arm around me, pulling me closer, and I molded myself to his body. Across the fire Sungah glared, and his glare made me press myself tighter to Bahan. I would not allow myself to be used.

I knew one thing: Bahan would ask and guide. Sungah would force me even if I resisted. I accepted the choice.

"Bahan," I asked. I could feel his attention. His arm was on my shoulder, part of me wished to push him away, but I leaned into his warmth, and felt him accept me.

Around us everyone but Sungah sat in silence. Then one of the girls slapped her thighs. She looked at other girls, then slapped them again. Another girl began to grin, and slapped a tattoo on thighs, then stomach, then chest. In moments the girls were setting a beat, rapid and wild.

The men added their own deeper thuds. I found myself adding my own sounds as I clapped and pounded my thighs and stomach. They began to sing, but it was wordless. I was reminded of an old movie named 'Caveman' where a small group of people created music only using their bodies and what they could hold. Some of the people stood, dancing just as wildly. Bahan caught my hand, and we joined them.

He smiled sadly at me, as we moved, and I returned the smile. "It will be all right, Bahan."

He nodded. He stopped dancing, taking my hand. I followed as he led me not to the hut where I had been all this time, but to another. "This my hut. That is for sick."

He let me go first. It was tiny as all the huts were, room enough to sleep and a few possessions. He lay on the pallet, helping me to kneel beside him. He lay back, and I found myself laying beside him on the narrow mattress. "We be together, but I let you decide."

How did this happen? I was laying beside a man in his bed, his arm around me. Everyone thought I was a girl except for two people, and another man intended to take what he wanted.

I was laying on my side, looking across Bahan's deep wide chest. My hand rested on his chest near his nipple, and I found my hand running idly across his chest. He lay quiet as my hand ran across that expanse. He was hairless, as I was but he was heavily muscled, obviously from hard work.

I heard something and I looked toward the door. Bahan had gone still, and he lifted his head.

Sungah was out there, I knew it. He had already pretty much said if I did not satisfy Bahan, I would have to satisfy him.

"She doesn't do much, does she?" Sungah commented.

I slid my hand down Bahan's chest, the edge of his pants slowing me a bit, then I felt the soft meat of his penis. I slowly stroked it, glaring into the darkness.

"Woman know slow cook is best. Man just angry it not made on time," I said. As I fondled it, I could feel Bahan getting harder. Oh my god, oh my God, oh my God, if he didn't leave soon, I would have to, to...

Instead of leaving, Sungah kept watching. I had to do it. I couldn't let myself be raped. I pulled Bahan's pants down, sliding them down his body. My hand still stroked him, and I soon saw *it* before my eyes. I could

feel Sungah's eyes on me. I looked up and Bahan watched me. He knew the struggle I was facing, and he would help if he could. In this all he could do to help was not stop me.



I reached out with my tongue, licking the head before me. Bahan gasped and I heard a curse from behind me. I moved so he could watch. "This you will not have from me," I said. Then I took the head in my mouth. For a moment I was stunned. I had a man's penis in my mouth, and didn't know what to do from here.

I had received a blow job before and I remembered what I had liked. I slid my mouth down, then my cheeks sank in as I lifted, feeling the head against my lips. I swirled my tongue around it as I slid deeper. Bahan's hand gently rested on my head. I looked first at Sungah, who was snarling in anger, then at Bahan. Bahan's face was tight with need, need I had caused.

I slid down, feeling him bump against my throat. I didn't even have half of him in my mouth! I kept sucking, licking, feeling him stiffen in my mouth. I lifted, my hand stroking him as I stared at Sungah.

"Now go away. I want to pleasure my man without watcher." I then slid my hand down as my mouth took him in again. I heard thrashing outside, and would have sighed if Bahan's hand had not kept my head where it was.

He was gasping, and before I realized what was happening, I felt him erupt in my mouth. I lay there stunned, my mouth filling now with sperm. I swallowed, frantic to breath, feeling him erupt again, then finally one last time.

His hand moved and I lifted away, seeing the nacreous liquid I had not swallowed flowing down to cover him. I had sucked a man off, let him come in my mouth. Swallowed it. Oh God, what had I done?

Bahan pulled me up, holding my head against his shoulder. I started crying against him, and he held me as I cried. I wasn't sure who or what I was anymore.

Acceptance

Days passed. Luha handed me a large pill bottle with odd round dots on wax paper. "You take every day. Five in morning, five at night before go to bed," she instructed. The dots were small waxy lumps of some herbal remedy. They tasted odd if I left them in my mouth, but I found that swallowing them didn't leave the taste in my mouth. She continued the enemas, but instead of administering them before bed, she would take me to the hot spring, inject the oil and the plug, then we would bathe together. Before we joined the girls in gathering food, she would walk me to the latrine and drain it out again.

The daily sunbathing became hour-long relaxing times. I was as brown as the other girls now, if we stood together, I was noticed only because I was a bit taller than them. My hair had been sun bleached to the color of mahogany. Between the enemas and pills, the days fogged.

Every evening I would play with Bahan as we lay in bed. Taking him into my mouth was just another duty. I was content with my life as it was.

The government men came and we hid. When we came back down to the huts, there were bags of tobacco, sugar, salt, oranges, rice and barley.

There was always something to do. Gathering food and the ever present nutmeg, pearls (which were kept by the girls that had found them), core samples and vanilla beans. We found time to play, swimming in the lagoon, splashing each other like children. The girls saw

my penis, but they ignored it as Bahan had predicted. I found my chest becoming tender and I was having mood swings. Frustration would drive me to tears. A gentle touch by Bahan made me want to hold him to me.

One night I lay not asleep yet, curled up with Bahan spooned against me. I felt his erection pushing against my back as I lay there, and it felt right somehow. I shifted, and now it slid between my legs. My thighs tightened, and I felt him gasp in his sleep as he slid between them. I felt a rush of power. I was able to do this to him.

He shifted, his erection moving from between my legs, and I felt him pushing higher. The daily enemas had taken an erotic turn. Luha had used slightly larger plugs over time, and having it up my ass made me feel complete. Right now there was no plug. I wanted the feeling again. He was just the right size.

I found myself reaching back, taking him in hand. I centered the head behind me, then as Luha always instructed, I pushed. The head slid in, and I gasped, writhing at the sensation. I wanted more, more!

I slid back and he entered me. I felt his arm tighten, then his hips pushed, and I felt him sliding deeper. I moaned as his lips brushed my neck. I writhed against him as he took control. He rammed into me, and I was his willing accomplice.

His hands slid, one up, the other down. I felt a hand on my penis for the first time in a long time, the other finding my nipple. I cried out as he pinched it. I had never known a nipple could be so sensitive. My body writhed. I wanted him to touch me, to fuck me, to use me as his vessel. I shoved my chest into his hand, reaching down to hold his hand against me. I was hard,

but not very. It was as if I really were a girl; that piece of flesh just a remnant of my old life.

He grunted and I felt him come inside me. The heat of it suddenly drove me into an orgasm like I had never had before. My penis was only a small portion of it. It was my breasts and my ass along with his movement; my entire body was involved. He slipped from inside me and I rolled over, hugging him to me.

I kissed his face, his tongue running into my mouth and I pushed into him, my hands holding his ass as he pulled me to him. "Again?" I asked plaintively. He laughed, sliding down my body. He captured a nipple and I almost hit the roof at the sensation. I cupped his head against me, feeling him gnaw at the nub. I was ready to scream as he began on the other nipple.

He slid further down and I watched as he took me into his mouth. I hissed at the sensation, my hands clawing at his head. "Yes, please, more." I felt myself hit his throat, then suddenly I was sliding even further. Oh god, he was deep throating me! I had to learn how to do that. I had to return the joy he was giving me.

Right then I would have even taken Sungah in my body, I was so aroused.

Another orgasm ran through me, a small portion of liquid leaking into his mouth, and I tried to push him away. I was too sensitive. He slid up my body, his arms catching my legs. I found myself looking into his eyes, felt him nudging my ass. I reached down, guiding him, and felt him slide into me again. "Oh yes." I purred, my arms coming up to his head, caressing his face. "Fuck me, Bahan, make me your woman."

I felt him plunge deep and I dropped my hands to his ass, forcing him deeper. I kept begging him to fuck

me and he obliged. It was wonderful, it was maddening. I wanted more, more, more!

He stiffened, and I felt him coming, my ass milking him. He rolled off me and we cuddled as we drifted back to sleep.

The next morning I awoke, looking at his face. I was still stunned by last night. I had taken him into my body and enjoyed every second. The others were waking up and I pulled on my shift, joining the girls at work. Sahia glanced at me, then began giggling. She spoke to one of the others, and soon all were giggling. I had been picking up the language and could tell they thought I had the freshly fucked look. I blushed as I ground the grain for breakfast. They kept looking at me and giggling.

Sungah came down, making his own tea before he sat glaring at us. The girls showed solidarity, sitting around me as they asked the questions you would expect. Was it good? Was Bahan big enough to satisfy? I found myself drawn into their talk, giggling along with them as I showed his measure by hands in the air, reminiscing as we got down and dirty.

The men joined us and were served. I doled out the food, taking a portion to Bahan. He took it, then froze as I pulled him down, kissing him. I pulled back, breathless, looking into his eyes.

I had found that 'Terimah Kasih' meant 'Thank you.' "Terimah Kasih, Bahan. For last night, and all the nights we will be together," I whispered.

Luha and I went to the hot spring, and she giggled as I stripped to take our bath. She scrubbed my back, then allowed me to scrub hers. I was getting into the water when I saw her pull out a pill bottle, dipping one

of the waxed medicine balls into her mouth. She caught me watching her then for the first time, she stood, showing her body to me. I had seen her naked before, but never all of her from the front. She was shy compared to the other girls, always fig leafing herself. But now...

She had high small breasts, and a tiny penis of her own. I stared at her body, then at her face. She walked over, kneeling on the stone beside my head. "I know you be good girl," she whispered, "I be good girl too." She leaned forward, lips touching mine. "We be good girl here long long time."

I realized what had been happening with the enemas of herbal oils, the pills, my suddenly sensitive nipples, the feeling of completeness they gave me even before I took Bahan into my mouth. I could have stopped her, not allowed the enemas. I could have refused the pills and the treatment of all who saw me as a girl here. But I had allowed it to happen. I had taken my choices, and they led to me as I was here now.

I felt my budding breasts. Soon they would be the same size as hers. I would grow into this role, become the woman she had become. I had a lover who gently introduced me to sex, and I hungered for more.

"Yes. I will be good girl." I kissed her back. "Be very good girl."

It has been three years now. I found that 'short time' meant six months. Over half of the girls returned to their villages and other girls replaced them. Of the other six girls, four had gone home heavy with child. That left four, including Luha and me. We are the long time girls, those who stayed because we found our lives here complete.

Sungah finally pushed someone too far and a year after my arrival, he died when his skull was crushed. The government men had seen his body laying on the beach the next morning and we were ordered into the jungle. I was close enough to see what they did. One man climbed down from the helicopter, drawing a pistol from a holster. He aimed and put two rounds into the body before they picked him up and attached the litter to hooks on the side of the plane. It flew out and we watched Sungah drop into the water, gone but not missed.

Every now and then, other men joined us, and there were problems until they understood the society. The girls would sometimes take care of them until the next time the villages sent their girls; even I discovered the different tastes of sperm from different men. Bahan understood and he would joke with me that I must enjoy it much. I would joke with him that he had chosen me because I would never get pregnant. He laughed, but I think that is why. He didn't want to lose his girl again.

I am at the last page in the old diary. I see no reason to continue recording. Bahan is coming down the beach and I want to stand and run into his arms, to feel him inside me again. I have made my choices, and I would not have it any other way.

I am leaving this journal hidden, wrapped in plastic to protect it. I do not know what crimes these men had committed, but one day their story will come to light.

Until that time I have strong arms, a warm body, and love to keep me safe...

But Bahan refused to let me stop my journal. When he discovered that I had filled the old diary, he asked one of the villages to send me another, so I continued recording our lives.

Not long after Sungah died, Bahan took me secretly to the other side of the island. There I saw what the core samples were for. Using a hand driven auger, they were digging core samples one foot apart, and four feet deep. They had covered more than half of the upright part of the fishhook. He told me that by the next month, they would reach the bend of the hook where the island was largest.

I looked at the neatly arranged holes in the ground. What was so important that these men had been condemned to be here? "Bahan..."

"No," he said sharply. ""If we tell you, you die, as we will."

"Bahan." I touched his face. "I have no village to return to. You are my world and my life. Please."

"Long ago, I worked on a diving boat," he told me. In my almost 18 months (at that point) on the island, I had learned the language in the best way, a dictionary you sleep with. "The government sent it to this island because of an old ship's log. They think there is a treasure of great value here; from an American privateer named the *Lady Liberty*."

I wracked my memory. There were few of the American Privateers of our revolution recorded; in fact the *Bon Homme Richard* was the extent of history that I remembered.

"She was commissioned late in the war; there are records in the museum in Jakarta from her voyage. She attacked a ship of the British East India company near Java in 1785."

"Wait." I wracked my brain again. "The war ended in 1783!"

“Communications lag.” He shrugged. “They had not yet learned the war had ended. They met a British Frigate a month later, the *Seahorse*, and refused to accept that the war was over. *Seahorse* fought them, but a sudden storm separated the two ships and *Lady Liberty* was believed sunk.

“But a small boat from *Lady Liberty* arrived in Jakarta. It was then controlled by the Dutch East India company, but a frigate named *Vengeance* arrived and discovered the survivors of *Lady Liberty*’s crew. They took them into custody and hanged them as pirates, but the logs of that voyage stayed in the record section of the Dutch.

“When Indonesia became a nation, they were heir to all of those records. Among them was the log of that voyage. It makes no sense, almost as if it were a code or nonsense. But at the end of it, the surviving officer commented on *Lady Liberty* dying on a fishhook.

“When satellites circled our world, one of them saw this island. The government believes this is that fishhook. They hired a group of divers to search, and the ship was discovered on the reef near the lagoon. But there was no treasure.”

He looked at the work he and the others had done. “The British East India Company reported four million pounds worth of gold lost in that ship. The ship herself was captured empty when her prize crew was captured on the way back to America. So somewhere here...” He waved at the island, “is 4 million pounds in money from that time; over five hundred million American dollars value today.

“So the government forced the crew of that boat onto this island. They expect us to find it for them. When treasure hunters come seeking, they join us. That

is why we take core samples, to discover buried treasure." He said it almost sardonically.

I felt as if someone had shoved a knife of ice into my heart. "Bahan, you have been here for years! Will they pay you? Or merely silence all of you?"

He smiled sadly. "Almost eight years, I have been here. One woman bears my child, and you." He brushed my cheek with a gentle smile. "I am content with my death as long as you survive."

"You fool," I whispered. Didn't he realize he was my life? Three years of my own life had been spent learning my place here, then settling. Would I be as sedate if he died?

"Miko." He caught my chin. "If I die, dig down in our shelter. Use what I have hidden to go home."

I nodded, saying nothing. He did not see. Before I was marooned, I had little life, and being here had re-defined who I was. Would my father accept what I had become? To accept his demand, I would have to face my father's wrath at the lover of men I had become. I would rather die than accept such from my own father!

I stood ready as Lanah twisted the stalk of bananas. I saw it drop and was there to catch it. Off to my left, Luha caught coconuts dropped by Miho.

Two girls had stayed of the original eighteen, along with Luha and myself. I had not bothered to learn the new girls; names; after all, they were short time girls. I handed off the stalk, catching the next as Lanah dropped down the tree. She cut the rope that bound her ankles and I tied a rope like it across my own. I had learned more than the language in the last five years.

I went to the next tree, holding with my hands as my ankles hopped up the bole of the tree. I reached the

bananas and signaled before twisting the stalk to break it free. A black tarantula crawled from it and I gently transferred it back to the tree before dropping them to the girl below.

She signaled enough, and I frog hopped back down the trunk. While collecting fruit was easy, the girls of the three tribes controlled the pearl beds. I had yet to learn how to dive, and they jealously refused to teach me.

Every day the men delivered ten to twenty core samples; they were collected when the supplies were delivered. I knew what they were doing finally, though I could not explain why to the women. Bahan had explained what it was all about, and that everyone, man and girl, on the island would die if the government knew.

Picture holding a fishhook by the eye. According to Bahan's map, they had taken 4' deep core samples every square foot for more than half the length of the island without finding what they sought when I arrived. In the years since, they had rounded the point and had perhaps a few hundred samples to go!

What would happen if they did not discover this treasure? For that matter, what if they succeeded? Would the government just let them go? That was my biggest worry.

We carried the food back to our own little village, then we all went down to the lagoon. We gathered the weight stones, piled them on the raft, and tied the vines. I had found out from watching the girls open the oysters in the afternoons that you have to collect a lot of oysters to get even a seed pearl; you didn't find a seed pearl in even a hundred oysters. The girls worked

hard for only three hours every day at this, collecting perhaps 200 oysters between them in that time.

There had been accidents; three girls had died while diving, another had suffered broken eardrums. In my time they had collected almost 50 pearls, from one a hundred grains in size down to fifteen.

I stood on shore as the raft they used was paddled out to the marker they had set. When the oysters ran out, they would paddle it about twenty yards further along a line they drew by marking trees ashore, and drop their marker's anchor.

"Come to the hot spring?" Luha asked.

"I'm going to take a swim first," I told her. "I'll meet you there." I walked down the beach toward the headland near the 'eye'. The reef ended there. Our island was just the lip of an ancient volcano with a thin layer of dirt, trees, and us, upon it. I liked swimming here, the sea came in like a monster that broke against, and slid gently over the reef.

This was where the ship had sunk according to Bahan. Swimming outside the reef, and knowing that, I could see the outline of her. I pictured a damaged ship, fleeing, mortally wounded. Her captain had chosen to ground her here, so he must have had a plan. The government had started at this end of the island because of the clues left in the log that made no sense.

Bahan knew it wasn't in any of the caves; we used them for shelter when the monsoons hit, and had all the time he had been there. In fact, the caves had been searched first. That was why they had delivered the core sampling equipment. If it had been buried less than three feet down, a mine detector or simple metal detector would have found it. They had tried that the

first year. The core sampling made sense; if they detected seasoned wood to four feet depth, they could assume a treasure chest.

I stripped, leaping into the ocean, then began to swim along the cliff face. This part of the island was a stone monolith almost fifty feet tall, the closest thing we had to a mountain. The facing was basalt. I swam in a lazy back stroke, just enjoying the feel. I turned to swim in a crawl, and that was when I saw it. A dark place on the bottom of the cliff face right there.

I tread water, looking at it. Then I swam toward the cliff. The cave was low; even at low tide it would be under water, I had to dive even now at low tide to get inside. The cave went in for several yards, then shelved upward. It was a lava tube, formed when the island had been still molten rock, the lava on the outside cooling because of the water even as molten rock flowed outward still.

The inside was an inky darkness and as I climbed out into it, I felt a piece of wood below my hand and a small metal tube. Holding the tube, I felt along the wood, finding cloth wrapped around one end. I felt the tube blindly. There were two tubes, one inside the other. A simple touch by removing the inner tube showed the other held what felt like wood shavings.

I realized what it was and grinned. My father had hated that I was into history, but if he had been here, we would be standing out there with Bahan, and wouldn't realize what I held. It was a fire piston, a device so ancient modern man thought they had invented it first. Yet it was ancient; the Chinese, Japanese, Romans even Indonesians had developed it long before modern man. I pumped it twice, and the shavings ex-

ploded into flame. I dumped the burning embers on the cloth of what I knew was a torch.

The cloth caught fire, and I gasped, closing my eyes against the actinic flare. Then after a time, I opened my eyes. The cloth burned merrily, and I lifted the torch from the obsidian. The light showed me a true wonder. There were a dozen sea chests drawn up against the stone walls of my refuge. I ignored them, for between them lay two bodies.

They were men by their clothing, though the mid 18th century was pretty ambiguous when it came to sex. After all, the high heel was designed originally for men to show off their legs, not women's. But these wore breeches. I knelt beside them. They lay together in a companionable space rather than a sexual embrace. One was dressed in a blue coat with gold buttons, a red sash around his waist with an ornate pistol. The other wore a coat that had once been scarlet, but which time had dimmed to rust. By his hand lay a pistol, and I picked it up. He had an ornate watch that had, of course, run down.

By their head lay a book, and I opened it. It was the true log of USS *Lady Liberty*, for one of the last entries read, 'Morgan and the others left yesterday. The damn fools thought I would merely let them take it all! But Pierre told me of it, and we moved the seized goods into the water cave.'

I read on. Cooper, the American Captain, had sent his only mobile assistant, a sailor named Lincoln, to gather food, but he was the only one small enough to fit through the opening. Both Cooper and Duvalier had injuries that would stop them from swimming; their only source of food and water had been Lincoln. When he had not returned, they starved to death. I looked at

those words, then at the scene. Lincoln's body was not there.

I held the torch up, and noticed that in the still air it billowed to my right. I followed that gentle hint. The lava tube ran upward and I followed it, finding poor Mr. Lincoln's bones where he'd been coming back, the rotted food still in his arms. As the torch began dying, I was sure I could see light ahead. As it did die, I was sure.

As the last flicker died, I saw a nacreous radiance, and moved on toward it. The upper entrance to the cave was small; if I had been as large as Bahan, I would have been unable to use it. I left skin upon every surface as I squirmed out. I lay there, gasping, for a long time.

Would I tell Bahan? No! Whoever had created a decade of hell for my man would not simply let him collect a salary! I was able to reach the beach, gather my clothes, then left to meet Luha. We spent time laving salve into my scars and scrapes, but I did not tell her where they had been gained.

Over the following week, I moved some things into the cave using my old battered aluminum suitcase. Some food and water, a kerosene lamp, though it used oil from fish we caught. I read the log, seeing the wonder of a new American dealing damage to the enemy before they died. But I could not tell him that I had discovered the secret. It would kill them all.

Then, in an instant, my choice was taken away.

The end of days

That last day started warm. I curled up against Bahan, feeling his chest under my hands. I had found contentment in my life on the island. He, with his gentle nature and spirit had made it so.

I went out to help with the meal as always. I was grinding grain into meal when Bahan touched my shoulder, pointing out to sea. Not one but three helicopters were inbound. "Trouble. Luha, get the girls into the woods, now!"

"I stood, signaling the eighteen girls together. "We need to hide."

"Why?" Miha asked.

"Now is not the time to talk!" Luha almost shouted. "Do or die!"

The girls ran toward the forest, and Luha and I chivvied them along. I did not worry why, only that Bahan was concerned.

We were into the forest as the men, as always, moved to stand where they could be seen clearly. I wanted to scream at Bahan to run, to survive, but it died in my throat.

The first helicopter was the same Hughes Defender. I screamed as the chain gun on its side ripped into them. Ten of the twenty men were down, already dead, as the helicopter turned, the ravaging gun ripping more up. I had seen such weapons in movies, but this was beyond reality. It was an assault of metal and fire that swept them away.

Behind me I heard a scream and I tackled one of the girls as she ran toward that horror. But she wasn't the

only one. Four others ran forward; as we watched, they died.

I pinned Sallah as she watched the others die. "Damn it, stay alive!" I screamed.

They were dead; the half-dozen or so men that had tried to flee had never even had a chance. The few girls that had run out to their men were dead as well. We retreated.

Luha led as I chivvied them on. Above us, a deadly fly sought us as we fled. It wasn't easy; we broke across a clearing and the Defender killed girls whose only sin was that they tried to cross that killing ground.

Luha reached the cliff. "Miko!"

"Dive off! Stay under water as long as you can! Trust me!" I screamed as I shoved the half-dozen women ahead of me. I heard the helicopter behind us, the gun screaming as we went over the edge. I almost saw the bullets ripping through where I was as I dived into eternity.

I hit the water, hearing the shells hitting above me. Sallah was above me, and I motioned for her to dive, then swim. But before she could do as I bid, bullets ripped through her body. I saw her spasm, then sink into the depths. The others were still submerged and I frantically motioned toward the cliff. They swam toward the dark opening. I passed them and heard splashes above us. Round objects fell toward us and I wanted to scream. Grenades!

I raced into the cave entrance, rising toward the surface, then felt a giant hand slam me forward. I hit the lip of the cave and was almost thrown from the sea by the concussion.

I came to in silence. I felt around on the floor of the cave for the lamp. I found the matchbox, then lit the lamp. With just the lamp light I could see I was alone. The others had not made it. I had no idea how long I had been unconscious. By diving down, I could see that the ocean beyond the cave was still bright. I wanted to just curl up, to cry for all the friends I had lost, but I had to know why they had killed us all. I took the lamp and began to climb.

As I crawled upward, tears burned in my eyes. I remembered every one of the men's faces, every girl that had already died. I wanted to scream, I wanted to get a gun and kill them all. My life had been destroyed again, this time by greed!

When I could see the circle of light at the entrance, I extinguished the lamp and set the matches down beside it. I squeezed myself through, gasping. It looked like it had been an hour or so since I had reached the safety of the cave. It was silent, only the jungle sounds assaulted me. I gasped, breathing in as I felt the pain of my squeezing through the hole in the earth.

I moved silently toward the lagoon and the sight made me want to cry. The two larger helicopters had landed and as I watched, all of the dead were gathered. I had felt they were disrespectful of the dead before, now I was sure of it. Our dead were being loaded like cord wood onto the larger of the two helicopters. Then as I watched, it lifted off, flying out to dump them into the sea.

There were a dozen men still on the ground and I shadowed their steps as they marched into the forest. They stopped near the last core sample holes; one of them counted back about twenty, then the others set to

digging. I watched as the trench they dug went deeper, deeper, then one man stopped. "Minister! Here!"

A small squat man stormed over and with his own hands cleared the soil from an oaken chest. I wondered, what had been buried here? He ripped the wood up, then screamed in fury. He reached down, and came up with a bottle.

"Rum? I wasted ten years of my life finding rum?" He threw the bottle down to shatter. Then he stormed off. I watched as the diggers came over to the chest. There were a lot of bottles in there and they opened and drank every one of them. I rested, silent, watching them binge. Then they walked down the hill toward the helicopters. After firing our huts, they boarded the helicopters and flew away.

Then I was alone on the surface of our island. I wanted to go down to the beach near our homes, to hug the ground he had lain on after death. But as our homes were engulfed in flame, I felt an answering fury burn within me. I would discover who had done this, and they would pay in blood.

I walked back to the cave entrance and slid down into my sanctuary. I was unsure if they would hide some men to catch any of us that had survived, so for two days I hunkered down among the chests.

Finally I came back up from that hell.

I wandered among the ashes of all we had loved. Only hunger drove me to gather food, and my meal was broken by tears. I had lost friends and loved ones in the attack. I had to vent my pain in our tears.

I could take treasure when a boat from the villages came, but what then? I pictured it in my mind, and it wasn't pretty. If I took even a handful of the coins from

just one chest to the village, I would have to sell them. But sell them where?

I would have to go to Timor or Java. The men who did this would eventually hear of fresh gold coins being sold by a native girl. They would come for me. They would torture the secret out of me. Maybe they would not catch me before I reached the American embassy, but proving who I was would take time. But even if I escaped with my life, they would still win.

I had to tell someone what happened. Someone who wouldn't try to force me to reveal where the treasure was. Get the press involved; make such a media firestorm that the murderers would be afraid to mess with me when we came back to bring up the treasure.

I had a reason to live again. Vengeance.

The New Me

I didn't want to do it, but I went to where Bahan's hut had been, digging through the charcoal into the sand beneath it. I cried as I remembered nights of love spent here with my man. I found a steel box buried a foot down, pulling it from the soil to sit before me. It wasn't locked because only he and I even knew it existed.

I opened it and inside were a dozen journals, written by him, and four dozen rolls of film. Below them lay that old Chinese dress I had worn on the raft, and a small cloth bag. I opened it and looked in wonder at the fortune in pearls within it. On top of it all was a sheet of paper, which I opened.

"Miko, if you are reading this, I am dead. I know that without me, there is nothing holding you to this island, so I have arranged your freedom. With the changes Luha's medi-

cines have made in you, you would find it hard to return to your old life. So I have done this to give you a chance.

“I have used some of the pearls the girls have given me over the years and crafted a new you. The villagers have carried out my wishes and made a new life for you. It is within this box.

“I also give to you all the information on the thirty men who have been consigned here. If you can, bring their fates to light. We have known for years where the treasure is. It is in an underwater cave in the wall of the cliff to the north. Find it, and gather what you need to redeem our lives. I will love you forever.

Bahan.”

I keened my sorrow as I looked at what he had arranged. Lissette DuBois’s passport had been changed. Instead of hers, it bore my picture. I suddenly remembered the day it had been taken. It was the second year I was here; he had joked that he wanted to remember me in that silly Chinese dress. He had hung a muslin sheet across the back of the hut and had me sit down, so demure and feminine as he snapped several pictures. Then he had given the film to a villager. A month later, they came back. We had giggled over them, then we made love.

I would not need an American passport, I had a Dutch one with my picture.

It was a week before any of the villages sent their canoes. I stood alone as they arrived. They were stunned and some of the men and girls wept openly as I told them of the attack. They would have assumed it was the work of pirates, for they still ply the islands even today. But I showed them where the helicopters

had landed, then took them to the oak chest they had dug up. We carefully gathered the bottles, including the shards of the broken one.

Then we sailed to that sanctuary. I waited as the long days passed, so like what it had been in the past. They treated me like a glass bottle, afraid I would shatter at the kindest touch. I have to admit I felt as fragile. Too many things here reminded me of our island; chance words, a girl flipping her hair out of her eyes, a couple touching in love. Schooners stopped by every few days and I found out their destinations before letting them depart. Jakarta, Kupang, or Timor, none where I wanted to go. Finally a captain named his destination as Darwin Australia. I paid for my passage with two small pearls, golden ones.

It was a week to the small city, barely 130,000 people; my passport and my tale of shipwreck took me through customs. I walked through; the old battered aluminum suitcase held a few things of value: my notebook; a small wallet made of the coins from Captain Cooper and The Comte Duvalier's coin purses, and Captain Cooper's watch and pistol. The backpack carried the real treasures: Bahan's notebooks; film; the neck of the bottle broken by the 'Minister' on the island; the log of the *Lady Liberty*.

I used the smaller coins to fund my path. They were German coins of the period, but the Germans with Teutonic logic had linked their value to the metals they were minted from. I walked out of the bank with almost 5,000 Australian pounds in a bank account under the name of Lissette DuBois.

I began to spend as soon as I left the bank. I had my hair done, turning my Mahogany tresses into a braid that ran halfway down my back. Then my nails and

skin; I was beautiful when I left the salon. Then clothes. I went into a store, and left wearing a sapphire Qipao with gold trim.



But I was becoming nervous and frightened even in this small city. Our village had been small, barely 40 of us while I was there, and the village I had come from was barely a hundred. But this was huge and loud and unsettling! Finally I went into a pub. I still carried my suitcase and a backpack the men of the last island had supplied.

I had spent five years there; I was 23 now so I could drink. I ordered a Foster's Bitter. As I sipped it, I remembered Bahan's attempts at making beer. He had tried a number of times, and failed miserably. His wines were superb, however, and I had enjoyed them over the years.

I could barely see the glass before me through the tears. Too many years of loving him, of being with him. They had stolen it from me, and I wanted it back!

A glass came down before me and I stared at it, then at the bartender. "What?"

"He bought it for you," he told me. I felt my fingers encircling the glass, but I paused.

"He?" The barkeep pointed, and I looked into lambent green eyes. My hand lifted, and I sipped the amber nectar.

The man came over, sliding onto the stool beside me. "Ken Kensington," he said. "I'm a reporter for the Northern Territories Times. You were shipwrecked I hear, Miss DuBois?"

I sipped the brew. "For five years," I replied.

"That explains no entry visa." He commented, pulling out a notebook. "Would you mind telling me your story?"

"No." I looked at the glass again, dashing the tears from my eyes. "I would rather not, if you don't mind."

He looked at me, then handed me a napkin. "Of course. Probably just you sitting there alone until rescued. Sorry to bother you."

"It's not that," I heard myself say. "I wasn't alone. There were about forty people in the village when I arrived. But it was a secret prison. A Minister of the government had created the village by dumping people there for a secret he wished to conceal. A secret he murdered them and the women that were living with them for. Only I survived."

"That's the kind of story I love," he told me. He sipped his drink.

"But I have to reveal myself to tell it," I said. The beer was making my head swim, but it also relieved my pain. I drained the glass; another landed before me without me asking for it. "I have to find a way to prove the Minister did it. He has to pay for... For Bahan."

"That was someone there?"

"Yes. He was my lover for those years." I started to cry again. "He saved me, gave me a home, gave me the passport, gave me a life I never dreamed of. Now he's dead."

"So you are not Lissette DuBois?" I shook my head. "Who are you then?"

"Michael Conner."

He looked askance. "That's a man's name. You are obviously not a man."

I laughed through my tears. "That is thanks to Luha, a lady-boy from one of the islands. She was giving me enemas and natural drugs all of the time I was

there. They made me what I am today." I sobbed. "We tried to escape, but they were using a helicopter with a chain gun on the side, killing everyone they could see. We leaped off the cliff into the ocean, but they dropped grenades and killed everyone else." I drained the glass. I was having trouble sitting up, and looked blearily at Ken who was signaling the bartender not to refill my glass.

I turned on him angrily. "What part bothers you? That I had a lover for five years? That I'm a man and you don't believe it? Why not try the Crocodile Dundee test and prove it!"

"No. I just want to stop you from making a fool of yourself in public."

"Why do you care?" I demanded, grabbing his hand and sliding it under my skirt.

He didn't resist, even as I pulled his hand against my sex. "See?"

He sighed, gently removed his hand and pulled my dress back down. "No more beer for you, love."

"Why not?" I was barely able to sit up. Man, that Aussie beer was potent.

"Because you need a sleep and to talk to a good friend of mine."

"Sure." I stood, staggering a bit. "Listen it's been fun but..." I fell to my knees. I wasn't really there as he spoke to the barman. Then I was hoisted up in his arms and he, followed by the barman with my luggage, went outside. It had gotten dark but still the city pulsed with too much life. I found myself in a car, being strapped in, and that was the last I knew for a time.

The Truth

I awoke in a soft bed. The ceiling was warm brown tile. And I treasured it. I sat up, feeling gentle air against my naked flesh. I reveled in it. When I had first come to the island, I had dreamed of a bed like this one, and many a time I had dreamed of Bahan and I... Now I was here and he was dead. I stopped enjoying what was around me.

There was a tentative knock and the door opened. It was the man from yesterday, Ken. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I wasn't sure if you'd have a hangover or not." He came over with a tray. On it were covered dishes, a teapot and cup, and a glass of water with two aspirin sitting beside it.

"I don't, thank you. I must have made a fool of myself."

"No, just a sad little girl who couldn't see the way to fix the problem. That is until you threw up."

"Oh God. I'm sorry."

"I was just glad I had gotten you out of the car first. Your dress is being cleaned, as is my jacket."

"I threw up on you?" I was mortified. He laughed, sliding the tray over my knees. "My housekeeper makes an excellent breakfast." He whipped the cover off the plates. Eggs, bacon, baked beans, sausages, fried tomatoes, mushroom, black pudding, hash browns, and a fried slice. "That's what we call the Full Monty."

"Why do they use the phrase?"

He blinked. "Honestly I don't know. Some people refer to the Field Marshall, referring to his usual breakfast. As an American, you might say 'the whole nine yards' or 'the whole ball of wax,' 'the whole enchilada,' or 'the whole shebang.'" He looked curious. "By the way, what do those sayings come from?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, tuck in. My housekeeper will bring some clothes up from my wife's closet. They should fit you."

I poured some tea, adding sugar, and squeezing a lemon slice into the cup.

"Wife?" I asked.

"Late wife. She was a small thing, like you." He smiled sadly. "She died in childbirth. The baby survived her by only minutes." He pointed. "Eat. Then come down and we can talk."

He left me to it. The breakfast was filling and I found myself sopping up the egg yolk with the fried bread. When I was done, I moved the tray aside and stood. There was a bathroom attached, so I showered, then returned to the room. There was a blouse and skirt laying on the bed, a pair of flat sandals, and the tray was gone.

The skirt was a bit tight, but fit well enough. I buttoned the blouse, feeling off. Five years of merely a sheath or Qipao to wear made me feel uncomfortable dressed fully as a woman. I opened the door. It led into an upstairs hall; I walked down to the end, where a staircase led downward.

Ken looked up, smiling. "I noticed how you reacted to the city, twitching. I know how you felt. You came from your home in America to a small village, and lived there with minimal modern conveniences. Then

you spent some time in a larger village, then you're dumped into a city; a small one, mind, but a city. So I brought you to my home." He stood, his hand out, and I took it. He led me onto a covered porch.

The house stood in the middle of a valley with trees spread as far as the hills to the south. He led me around the entire circumference of the building. There were half a dozen buildings to the east and west, with a few Aborigines who worked there. To the north was the sea, less than a mile away.

"My family owns all of this," he motioned. "From the edge of the hills there, to the ends of the forest east and west. Has for four generations. We're about eighteen kilometers east of Darwin. The station has only about thirty-five workers, and they don't come to the house. So except for Millie, we're alone."

"So you move me somewhere comfortable, feed me, get me to relax, and expect me to spill my guts to a reporter?"

"The thought had crossed my mind, but that isn't what I'm doing. Like I said, you had the look of someone who lost her entire world. I felt that when my wife died, and couldn't stand to see that look. I want to help you get what you want."

"And what do I want?"

"Closure. You want to see the man who murdered your friends caught. You want to know justice has been done. I can't guarantee you'll get it, but that friend of mine and I might be able to pull it off."

"You talked about your friend last night. Does this miracle worker have a name?"

"Deputy Chief Inspector Ridgley, Australian Federal Police. We have an... understanding. There are

time the police have information the public needs, and he becomes my 'unnamed source'. Then again, there are things a reporter hears that the police need to know, and I become an 'informant'.

"We share the information, sometimes I get a better story, other times I have to bury them deep. It evens out."

I hugged my arms over my chest, and felt his arm encircle my shoulders. "I think there is a catch you haven't mentioned."

"It works because I get all of the ducks in a row before I call him. Give him all of it and let him think of how to work from there. If I lie to him, our deal is off." He turned me, looking into my eyes. "Talk to me. Tell me what is happening."

We walked back inside. He rang for Millie, a woman like a human sparrow, small and flighty. She delivered tea, and Ken made up the cups. "So are you going to tell me?"

"Yes." I turned the cup before me. "Have you heard of a ship named the *Lady Liberty*?" I asked.

"Not in this century," he laughed.

"Try the 18th," I said. His laughter died.

"Talk to me."

"I know where she sank and where her cargo is."

He shrugged. "So claim it."

"I can't," I told him. "There are people in the government of Indonesia that have their eyes on getting it for themselves."

"Really?"

"I have proof. But to keep them from stealing it after murdering almost three dozen people, I need help."

He sipped his own tea, eyes boring into me like an artillery sight. "You have proof you say. Anything to verify that claim? Something you can show me in public?"

I drew out the watch, opening it. "Andrew Cooper's watch. I know where he died, and how. I have the log, his watch." I handed him the antique pistol. "His own pistol, a commemorative issue he bought before he left Boston."

He looked first at the watch, then at the pistol. "We need to talk." He got a tape recorder with a small attached microphone and turned it on.

"Agreed," I offered. "It began for me when the *Jakarta Queen* struck an old mine and sank..."

I told it all, handing him the journals, ship's log, and that film. I showed him the broken bottle the Minister had thrown, hoping there might be fingerprints on it.

It was late afternoon by the time I finished. He fed me a good meal and I fell asleep, drained.

I was dreaming of the island. It was dinner and we were all leaning back, replete. Bahan held me against his chest, rocking me as he sang something in Indonesian. I didn't understand the song, odd because we had spoken nothing but that language and the pidgin made by Dutch and British merchants over the centuries. "I don't understand that, Bahan," I teased him.

"It is an ancient song in our tongue from when we first came to the islands," he whispered. "Only the dead know it." I stiffened in his arms. Something soaked my back and I wanted to turn to face him, but

he held me on a grip like iron. "I have gone on, Miko. You must let me go."

"No!" I struggled against him. "I love you! I wanted to die with you!"

"Yet you live. You must go on."

"Please, no!" I fought. Bit by bit I could see him, see the wounds from the hailstorm of bullets, see the muscles flayed from his body. "Bahan, please!"

"You must live, my heart." He held me tight and I could feel his breath against my neck. "You must go on. I love you."

"No! Please!" I struck out to slap some sense into him and he spoke in an Australian accent.

"Bloody hell!" I found myself looking at Ken, his eye squinting through one hell of a shiner. I was in that sinfully soft bed and from the look of him, I had been pummeling him unmercifully. "Ken?"

He laughed and his hand came up, wiping blood from his lip. "Yes. Though you called me Bahan a couple of times."

I remembered my struggles in the dream, the blows I had struck. "I'm sorry, Ken."

"One hell of a nightmare from what I heard." I leaned into his arms, and he hugged me, hands gently rubbing my back.

"I was on the island in Bahan's arms. Just when I thought the attack had been a nightmare, Bahan began to bleed as he did when he died, telling me to live on. I wanted to die, and he wouldn't let me!" I wailed in anguish, and he rocked me, whispering nonsense sounds as he held me. After a while I merely sat there, enjoying the attention.

“What time is it?”

He shrugged, still holding me. “About nine, I think.”

“I slept all night?”

He laughed. “Try about three hours. You were pretty worn out from telling me what had happened. I called the Deputy Chief Inspector; he’ll be here tomorrow morning when the pictures arrive.” I started. “You gave me the films, and I sent them to the paper to develop them. There were a lot; the lab man told me they would be here around eight. With his permission, I also gave the managing editor a heads up. So all you need to do is sleep until then.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” I whispered. “I might go back to the island again, see them die again, or end up at the evening fire the only one still alive.”

“You don’t have to.” He pulled back from me. “I have a pretty good sized library, you can read, or watch the telly.” I shook my head.

Then I leaned forward, gently kissing his lips. I leaned back, looking into his eyes. “Is that what you want, then?”

“I wasn’t sure how you would take the offer...” He leaned in, his kiss silencing me. I moaned, my mouth opening, and our tongues dueled. I felt him opening the front of the nightgown and I almost screamed as he cupped my breasts. I felt myself being lowered, the gown being stripped away.

I opened my half-lidded eyes, seeing him stand, his shirt and T shirt hitting the floor. I sat up, capturing his belt, undoing it, then the zipper. I pulled his pants down and he stepped out of them. I cupped his hardness in my hand, then pulled down his briefs. “I want

to feel alive again. Make me feel alive, please." Then I leaned forward, licking the plum-colored head.

He hissed, then pulled me away from him, his body coming down on top of mine, kissing me as our hands played with our bodies. I held his erection, lifting my legs, feeling him slide between them, then gasped as he slid into me. I locked my heels around his back, my hands caressing his hair and back as he made gentle love to me.

The Truth

For a moment, I thought I was back on the island, Bahan spooned against me as we awoke for our day. But the bed was still there, and the arm across me was freckled and too white. I ran my hands over that arm, nestling closer to him. I felt at peace for the first time since the attack. Perhaps in time I would even get used to the bustle of a city again. I lifted the hand, kissing it gently.

As I set it back down, his arm tightened, the hand lifting to cup my breast like a friendly animal finding a comfortable place to rest. I could feel his morning wood brushing my thighs. I sighed, rubbing back against it.

"Christ, woman, wasn't four time last night enough for you?" I felt his breath against my neck, then his lips.

"Never enough," I whispered back, and he chuckled.

"I just had to find the nymphomaniac, didn't I?" I giggled, and he laughed with me as I turned to face him. We kissed gently, and he propped up his head. "Did you sleep well?"

I chuckled. "After your rapacious demands on me? It was the only way to escape your lustful proddings," I teased.

"Then maybe..."

I covered his lips with my fingers. "I look forward to my next ravishing, and the next and so on."

"Good on you, then. Let's see if Millie has breakfast ready."

"Does Millie know about..." I gestured helplessly toward my groin.

"If I like it, she wouldn't care if I brought in an Angora sheep, provided I didn't try to shear it in bed. And the mess of course."

"Of course."

"Then up, into the shower, and down for brekkie." He stood up, holding out his hand. "We can share it, you know."

"Won't that cause things to... come to a head?"

"I should hope so."

We showered, and as predicted, things did come to a head. I started to go down on him again, but he stopped me. As he thrust into me, I leaned back. "One time I'm going to do that until you come." I whispered a warning.

"Maybe later. We do have all day." I merely moaned in appreciation.

We had the same breakfast as the day before, but this time at the table together. We spent the time eating, gently touching, even gently kissing as we devoured the meal. Millie came in carrying several large manila envelopes. "The courier from the paper

dropped these this morning while you were still abed, sir."

"Thank you, Millie. Has Ridgley called?"

"Yes, he will be here in about two hours."

"Good." She left, and he slit open the envelope marked #1. "I used Bahan's notes on the film cans so we have them in chronological order," he explained. "If every one came out, there are 1152 pictures."

We went through them together. The first envelope covered about a year and a half. I saw Bahan in a white lab coat on the deck of a ship. There were pictures of the local crew, and Caucasian divers, and a picture of the island from the sea. For three or four months it was idyllic bliss. Even the underwater shots of the *Lady Liberty* made me happy.

Then it changed. Bahan had not taken pictures of the actual capture of him and his associates, but the next scene showed them on the beach where our village would once stand. It was a shot taken from waist height, and I felt cold. "That is the Minister."

"You're sure." His tone was soft.

"Yes."

He picked up the picture, looking at it. "Salam Pangborn. Head of the Ministry of Tourism for the last fifteen years."

We went on. There were shots of the men using the hand augers to collect samples, with dates clearly marked. Then, from three years before I had arrived, there was a shot of the inside of the cave, the bodies of Cooper and Duvalier, and the chests.

Then came candid pictures of me, often with Luha. Then others of me alone; swimming, sunbathing, They were all from the first year.

Then we opened the last envelope. Ken handed the pictures to me and I identified the people in them. I looked at one of a man who had arrived a year and a half before the attack. "That is an Australian, I think he said his name was Puck."

"Puck." He wrote it down. "I had a brother named Roger in the same business, he died a couple of years..." His voice died as he saw the picture. He stared at it with what started as shock, then became sadness, then fury. "That's my brother. He was alive?"

"Until the attack." I saw him wince, and I touched his hand.

"What was he doing?"

"As I said, he was a reporter, like I am. He called before his death. He said he'd heard rumors about the *Lady Liberty* and the treasure, then we got a telegram telling us he'd died from a shark attack."

"Oh. I am so sorry."

He caught my hand. "But he found it. He died knowing where it was!"

"Yes. Bahan was always sure the Minister would kill them when it was found. They came after a core sample and must have cut into the wood of a chest full of rum bottles."

"So Pangborn never got it."

"No." I looked at the picture again. Puck had been one of the last to arrive; his irrepressible optimism had brightened the last days. I wished I had left earlier; Bahan had suggested it gently less than a year after we

had become lovers, but I held on like a tick rather than leave him. If he had told me where the treasure was and I had made the trip then, he would be alive.

"If I hadn't been so in love, I could have saved them." I whispered. "Bahan begged me to leave so many times."

"Stop that. If you were psychic, you could have had everyone in the cave when the attack happened."

I wanted to apologize but the door to the dining room opened and a man walked in. Everything about him made me think this was a tough no-nonsense man.

"Edmund, good to see you. Edmund Ridgley, this is Miko Conner."

"Ma'am." He nodded. "I had a collector's shop look at the watch and pistol. Definitely American Revolution era. The pistol was made in the factory of William Henry, a gunsmith from Pennsylvania and a delegate to the First Continental Congress. Three were made at the same time. One belonged to Alexander Hamilton, the other to John Jay, the third was given to Andrew Cooper, captain of the American privateer *Lady Liberty*. But you knew that.

"The watch was made by C. Bailey of London. Based on the touch marks on the sterling cases, it appears to have been made in 1777. Chain driven fusee movement, white enameled dial with Roman numerals, decorative steel hands. It has a short steel chain and key instead of a stem winder; diameter of outer case is 2.25". The back of inner case is engraved with the inscription 'Libertatem venit ad terribilis pretium.' 'Freedom comes at a terrible price' in Latin." He looked at me with a considering air. "Just these are worth about 11,000 Australian Dollars."

"I don't feel I own them," I admitted. "Museum-quality artifacts belong in a museum."

He gave an approving nod. "So you know where the *Lady Liberty* is?" I nodded. Again the appraising look. "And the 546,803,000 Australian dollars worth of gold?"

"I'd give every cent of it to have them alive again, to live out my life on that island with them." I made a gesture. "Money is not happiness, ever."

"You'll do." He nodded. "Now why don't you lay this out for me, Ken?"

Ken walked him through it, from the arrival of the men on the island, the search, their hidden discovery, my arrival, then the attack and my escape. Once he was done with Ken, he began on me. Ridgley had a gentle manner of questioning and I understood how he had earned his rank. He looked at the passport, then at me.

"Technically, you entered the country illegally with a false passport. Of course we can contact the American Embassy and they can issue you a new passport."

"No." I shook my head. "I spent five years being a woman, loving a man. My father would never understand."

He looked at me for a long time. "So what would you ask?"

"Issue me an Australian passport. I will immigrate to live here." I looked up. "Michael Conner is dead. He has been for five years, ever since I landed on the island."

He watched me for a long time. "Let me explain what the problems are. First, we are talking about a government minister in a neighboring country. We

cannot merely call for his arrest, whatever evidence we have." He held up a hand to forestall my comment.

"I agree that we must bring him to justice but we cannot issue a warrant they will accept. It would be like issuing a warrant from here for the arrest of your American Secretary of the Interior. We would have to prove the case in court to gain the extradition and Indonesia does not have an extradition treaty with us.

"However, he is due in the country in about three weeks. If he were to try to capture you, we can get him for attempted kidnapping and use that to put him before a judge. Then we can bring forth all of the evidence and put him away, forever." I looked up.

"So if you are willing, we can take him down, with your help. But there is danger here. If he moves too fast, he will escape with you or kill you. If he takes you, from what I have seen, he will make you take weeks to die just for keeping the secret from him."

I looked down and as if in the dreams again, I felt Bahan holding it. I looked up, but he was like he had been before the attack. *You do not need to risk yourself*, he seemed to whisper.

I will always love you, I replied in my mind. *If I die getting my revenge, we will be together again.*

He chuckled and I could almost feel him pulling my hand against his chest. *We will always be together here in our hearts. Be careful.*

"What do you want me to do?"

The plan

Ken was third from the end of the second row of reporters when the story broke. We were in one of the meeting rooms within the beautifully restored Trea-

sury Building of 1851. I was facing the world, as it were, with the director of the Australian Museum in Sydney. When he heard about my claim, he flew me down to Sydney in a government jet for the press conference he wanted. I was amused when Ken was refused permission to board and had to fly down commercial, but I wished I had his hand to hold when the limousine pulled up at the hotel. The InterContinental Sydney is one of the nation's premier hotel, located on the edge of the harbor. It overlooks the Opera House, Sydney Harbor Bridge and the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Situated at Circular Quay, the hotel was once the site of the first Government House and later the Treasury Building. But I must have looked like a yokel when they ushered me into the Australia Suite, located on level 29, Sydney's largest and most celebrated suite. I had to hope Deputy Chief Inspector Ridgley was able to convince his superiors. It would be a bitch if I found myself stuffed in a crate bound for Jakarta because they didn't want to spend the money.

I tried to smile but the bustle was driving me up the wall. The Director noticed, leaning over to me. "Will you be all right, Miss Conner?"

"I spent five years trapped on an island alone, sir," I told him. "This is like being stuck in a cage with rabid wolverines."

He laughed. "Well, I will try to curb the wolverines." He stood, looking out over the reporters. He tapped the microphone, and they fell silent.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, I have important news. I ask that you raise your hands and do not shout when I introduce our special guest. She has spent

several years alone on an island after she survived a ship wreck.

“She is Michelle Conner of America and the ship, the *Jakarta Queen*, hit a floating mine north of our country almost six years ago. She was the sole survivor. If you wish, you may petition for interviews regarding that incident another time. While she was there, she discovered the shipwreck of the millennium when she found the treasure captured by the *Lady Liberty* in 1784.”

He held up his hands as the shouting began. “Please! After almost six years completely alone, crowds make her nervous. If you insist on behaving like a babbling, bumbling band of baboons, I will declare this press conference at an end. This is your only warning.” He glared at them all.

“When it comes to questions, you will raise your hands like you used to do in class, for those of you that have actually gone to school, and she will pick you. So without further ado, I introduce Michelle Conner.”

I stood, wearing the Sapphire Qipao. I started as cameras flashed but held onto the podium as if it were that hatch cover again. “Please, if you will not take my picture? The flashes are hurting my eyes.” They finally stopped. “I will read a prepared statement and show you some of what I recovered before my rescue. I ask that as I hold them up, wait until I close my eyes before taking pictures.

“As the director has told you, I was shipwrecked when the *Jakarta Queen* sank. As he also said, I will take requests for interviews about my ordeal at another time. What I have to show you today is proof of my claim that I have discovered the treasure taken during the cruise of the American Privateer *Lady Liberty*. First,

this is the log of that ship; the curator of the Museum has verified its authenticity.”

I held up the book and the instant my eyes were closed, the hall exploded in flashes.

I lowered it and once the flashes had stopped, I opened my eyes again. “With the treasure, I found three bodies. One was an able seaman, Patrick Lincoln. There were also the remains of Ettiienne Comte Duvalier, and Captain Andrew Cooper. I was able to identify the bodies of the Captain and Comte by their effects. Specifically, Captain Cooper’s watch and his presentation pistol.” I held each up in turn and the hall exploded in light yet again. I lowered them, then looked back at my notes. “Along with that, I found twelve chests filled with British coins dated 1783.

“After a long time, I was rescued by fishermen who took me to a local island, and I came to Darwin in the Northern Territory. When I told a local newspaper man about my discovery, he informed the Museum, which approached me. In return for a finder’s fee, I am donating the entire find, valued I am told at more than half a billion dollars, to Australia and the Museum here in Sydney for display.

“I will now take questions.”

I went through what you would expect. How does it feel to suddenly be rich? “It is better to be alive.” They asked a lot of questions that I fielded easily. Ken sat there, merely taking notes. Then he raised his hand. “When are we going to see this treasure with our own eyes?”

The question was a hook and I sank it deep. “Tomorrow, the Museum in concert with the Royal Australian Navy, will plot the course from the log to find

the island. At that time, the government will commission a salvage vessel to go there and collect it." I held up my hands. "Please, that will be all, I am fatigued and this conference has stretched my nerves to the breaking point."

They were polite as I was ushered out. As we left, I saw another delegation coming in. They were having a Southwest Pacific conference; as I passed him, Pangborn glared at me. I only hoped Ridgley had planned it correctly.

Vengeance

They had planned a big welcome dinner, but I begged off. My calls were being screened, so there were only a dozen for me to deal with. All but one was for interviews. The last one set my heart skipping. "Watch yourself, love, he knows and he's pissed. Edmund says good hunting."

I went to the mini-bar and poured a glass of wine. We had to say it would be tomorrow when I met with the government because we had to pressure Pangborn into acting without thinking. I fidgeted, wondering when he'd make his move. I just wanted it to be sooner rather than later.

The sun set, and I looked out over the harbor, thinking of Ken's home, of the island, the peace I had once had and yearned for again.

There was a knock. I had ordered a small dinner, and it was probably room service. I set down the glass, walked over, and opened the door. I saw Pangborn and tried to slam it shut, but another man, this one twice my size, slammed it open, throwing me to the ground. I looked up and had a chance to see where death would come down that train tunnel of a silenced pistol.

He walked in, followed by Pangborn. He was only about my size, but I have never seen such a pair of cold eyes. He looked at me for a few seconds, then my head seemed to explode as he slapped me.

“Where is it?”

“Where is...” He slapped me backhand.

“I listened to your interview. Very nice. The treasure I spent ten year hunting and I was on the wrong island. Well, you’re going to tell me where it is, and perhaps you will die quickly.”

“You jumped the gun,” I snapped back. “They knew where it was all the time.”

He froze. “They who?”

“Don’t con me. They knew where it was but they also knew you’d kill them once you knew. Bahan, Roger Kensington, the others. They knew.”

Pangborn lifted his hand and his associate lifted that gun again. Then the door exploded inward. The man with the gun turned and went down as Australian SAS men shot him. Pangborn stared at them as Edmund Ridgley walked in.

“Salam Pangborn, you are under arrest for attempted kidnapping. With the information Miss Conner has already given my agency, we are also charging you with mass murder and attempting to steal a national treasure of our two countries. Take him away.”

Homecoming

It wasn’t fast; the island had never been claimed by anyone, and Indonesia tried to seize the treasure. It

probably would have been in court for the next century, but I suggested that both Australia and Indonesia split the coins for their museums and collect the revenues for having them displayed worldwide. After Pangborn, the Indonesian government was willing to bend, and Australia could always say that they had the pistol watch and log in their museum.

I was upset because Ken hadn't even bothered to call. I went through months of talks, returning to the island, bringing up the treasure. At my behest, several hundred thousand dollars of my finders fee was given to the villages. One day, they would have monuments for those that had died on the island. I returned to Darwin where Ridgley met me in his office. He led me out to a car and handed me an American passport with my name as Michelle Conner, and my sex listed as female.

"It would have been a stone bitch to issue an Australian passport; here your sex at birth is still on your passport, so you'd be listed as male. But I have friends in the State Department. They were willing to issue that, and this." He handed me the birth certificate of a female child born on my birthday.

"Thank you, Edmund." I hugged him. He stopped and motioned. "A friend asked me to deliver you here. So I will be your Lone Constable, riding off into the sunset."

"Ranger, Lone Ranger."

He grinned and I climbed out. I was wearing a dress the Historical society of Sydney had bought for me, and I had to admit I looked good. In my purse, I had prescriptions for female hormones and an extended visa that meant I could live here for a long time. I stopped as I looked at the sign. It was the pub I had

been in when I met Ken. I felt like a drink to drown my sorrows.

I walked in and the barkeep waved as if he'd seen me just the day before. He set a Fosters in front of me and waved away the money. "It's been paid for."

"Paid for? By who?"

"By a man who wanted to make sure the world moved on to the next big story." I turned slowly. Ken stood there, looking as if he wanted to sink into a hole.

"I didn't feel like sharing you with the world."

I leaped up and found myself in his arms, kissing him as if there were no tomorrow. We separated and looked at each other.

"What do you have planned for the next decade?" he asked.

"Nothing. I am now wealthy and have nothing I must do."

"That is not true. You have a bed to warm and a lover waiting for you." He kissed me gently. "If you want."

I laughed, biting his nose. "I want."

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