

Dark Justice: Book #2 – Garden of Eden by Erin Wade

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Edited by Melissa Barker

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DEDICATION

To the one who has always supported me in everything I have ever undertaken. You have encouraged me and have always been my biggest fan. Life is sweeter with you.

Erin

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A special “Thank You” to my wonderful and witty “Beta Master,” **Julie Versoi**. She makes me a better storyteller.



Thank you to my dear friend and fellow author **Morgan Elliot** for sharing her knowledge and wisdom.



Contents

Chapter 1 – Planning for the Future.....	5
Chapter 2 - What Happened?	9
Chapter 3 – The Rich & Famous	13
Chapter 4 – The Winner is	16
Chapter 5 – Home at Last	19
Chapter 6 – The Art of Negotiating	22

Chapter 1 – Planning for the Future

Sage Southerland lay on her back resting her head on the black panther that was the only mother she had ever known. Kinga had rescued Sage when killers had murdered Sage’s father and pregnant mother leaving the newborn to starve to death.

“Look at this photo, Kinga.” Sage held the colorful brochure in front of the big cat so she could see the picture of snow crusted Mount Ararat. “The snow never melts.” She shivered involuntarily and continued. “This is where I will be for the next two years while you get to stay in our incredible sunny canyon.”

Kinga licked Sage’s cheek and nuzzled the woman’s neck causing her to giggle. “Yes, I know I will have Court to keep me warm. That is the only reason I agreed to go. We are taking Jake too. I wish we could take you.”

You know I can’t leave the canyon,” Kinga thought.

“I know. The canyon is your life in many ways.” Sage whispered. “Still, I will miss you. Court said we will fly home once a month to spend time with you.”

A warm, silky tongue in her ear made Sage squeal and roll off the panther. The two were scuffling and rolling about in front of the fireplace when Courtney Southerland walked into the room. She suppressed the urge to join in the wrestling match choosing not to interfere with her wife’s play time with the panther.

The aroma of freshly made coffee pulled the award-winning producer to the cabinet where she poured two cups of the hot liquid. A warm breath on her neck preceded strong arms wrapping around her as Sage nuzzled her hair nipping at her shoulder. “I love you,” Sage declared.

“Um,” Court cooed turning to capture her wife’s lips in a soft kiss. “Is Kinga okay with our plans?”

“Yes, just as long as we return home often.”

Court handed Sage a cup of coffee and led her to the sofa in front of the fireplace. “Honestly, I’m not looking forward to spending two years on a mountain where the permafrost is older than I am, but I am excited about searching for Noah’s Ark.”

“Do you hope to find it, or do you wish to prove it never existed?” Sage inquired before sipping her coffee.

“Finding it would be the biggest accomplishment of the ages,” Court declared. “Not finding it doesn’t prove it never existed. It only proves that it didn’t come to rest on Mount Ararat, and I am certain it did not settle on that mountain.”

Court’s phone rang and the face of her agent Huntley Carver popped onto the screen. “Hello, Huntley.”

“Court, I’m just checking to make certain you and Sage will be on the flight to Los Angeles in the morning.”

Court sighed loudly, “Yes, we will be at LAX before noon. Are you picking us up or sending your driver?”

“I plan to pick you up myself,” Huntley exclaimed. “You are my first potential Oscar winner. I plan on giving you the VIP treatment all week.”

Court laughed at her friend. “If you really loved me, you would just be my proxy at the awards ceremony and let me stay home with my wife.

“Seriously!” Huntley snorted. “I plan on dragging you around and showing you off like the second coming.”

“Speaking of second comings,” Court said. “When will the Genesis Ark people have our passports and papers ready? Has the Turkish government finalized everything? I’m getting a little anxious to begin our discovery trek.”

“That is another thing I want to discuss with you. This morning I received everything you and Sage will need, but they are balking on the armed guard unit they promised to hire for you. I told them it is in your contract, and they can

either honor the contract or release you from it which means they will forfeit the half-million advance they paid you.”

“Just be certain we don’t have to return the advance,” Court said. “We bought the house and a few other things, so we don’t have the money. If it comes down to it, we can hire our own security escorts.

“I really want to do this, Huntley. I’ve done a tremendous amount of research and talked with others who have tried to find the ark. I think I know where it is.”

“Wow! You never cease to amaze me,” Huntley declared. “I’m getting excited too. Care to share your theory?”

“No.” Court chuckled. “I’d rather provide absolute proof before I begin guessing.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Huntley quipped. “I am looking forward to seeing you and Sage in Los Angeles tomorrow. Don’t disappoint me!”

Sage snuggled into Court’s side. “Before the phone rang, you said you were certain the ark wasn’t on Mount Ararat. How can you be so sure?”

“Because the great flood happened long before Mount Ararat was formed. Greater Ararat and Lesser Ararat are two stratovolcanoes that have evolved over the centuries since the flood. They built up over the mega-annums from the lava of volcanic eruptions after the ark landed. They didn’t even exist when the flood water receded.”

“Mega-annums?” Sage queried.

“A mega-annum is a million years,” Court explained.

Court could see Sage’s brilliant mind working as she categorized the new information.

“I love what we do,” Sage declared. “It is so interesting and exciting. I can’t wait to explore you on Mount Ararat.”

Court laughed. “You mean explore with me on Mount Ararat.”

“No! I said what I meant.” Sage grinned mischievously.

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“Feel free to explore,” Court giggled. “We’ll be in Los Angeles tomorrow for the Academy Awards.”

Chapter 2 - What Happened?

“I’ve booked you into the Hollywood Roosevelt,” Huntley informed them as her limo pulled from the airport. “It’s on Hollywood Boulevard and right in the center of all the action. You are within walking distance of the Dolby Theater, the Chinese Theater, and the Hollywood Walk of Fame.”

“What is the Walk of Fame?” Sage asked.

“A place where everyone who is anyone has a star with their name on it embedded in the sidewalk.” Huntley answered.

“If you win an Oscar, will they put your name in the sidewalk?” Sage’s excitement was growing by the minute.

“I doubt it.” Court laughed. “Documentary film makers aren’t at the top of the nomination list. It’s not just a nomination, if you accept you must pay thirty-thousand dollars to have your name put into the sidewalk.”

“We can afford it,” Sage declared.

“I know, but it doesn’t seem like such an honor when you must pay for it. That seems skewed to me.”

“You and your principals,” Huntley chided her. “If you ever win, I am paying the bucks to put your name on the Walk of Fame.”

“Whatever.” Court shrugged. “You are the one who should be nominated best agent ever.”

Sage looked out the window of the limo. “What is that?”

“It’s a homeless encampment,” Huntley wrinkled her nose. “They are everywhere. I wouldn’t walk around Los Angeles if I were you. Even the Walk of Fame isn’t safe.”

“That is awful,” Sage wailed. “Can’t someone help them? What happened to them?”

“I don’t know why the state doesn’t provide them assistance,” Huntley mumbled. “It may be an overwhelming

problem. I try to stay out of politics. If you are wise, you will too.”

Sage snuggled into Court’s side. “I want to go home as soon as this is over.”

“So do I,” Court agreed.

“Tomorrow the routine will be pretty much the same as Cannes,” Huntley said. “Both of you will have clothes fittings in the morning, makeup, and hair in the afternoon then the awards ceremony. Seating is theater style allowing people to sit as close to one another as they deem safe.”

##

They had dinner in a restaurant in the hotel. “I don’t really want to be on the strip after sundown,” Huntley noted as they walked back to their rooms. “You two get a good night’s sleep. You have a busy day tomorrow.”

They bid Huntley goodnight and walked into their room. Court locked the door and turned to face her wife as Sage wrapped her arms around the blonde’s neck and hoisted herself up to encircle Court’s waist with her legs.

“How do you do that so gracefully,” Court whispered against her lips as Sage locked her ankles together. “It’s very, um, uh—”

“Catlike,” Sage hissed.

“Very,” Court gulped.

After they made love, Sage lay on her back listening to her wife get her breathing under control. She marveled at the way Court always left her weak in the knees and cuddled her sweetly until she fell asleep. She couldn’t imagine life without Courtney Southerland.

She had mixed emotions about wanting Court to win the award for best documentary. God’s Canyon was fascinating and had won many awards. If it won an Oscar, it would mean six more months of talk-show tours and one-night stays in

towns all over the world. If it didn't win, they could depart for Turkey and their search for Noah's Ark.

Sage became restless needing to run but knew it was too dangerous in the city rife with criminals, desperate homeless people, and drug addicts. How different Los Angeles was from their home in the canyon.

As if reading her thoughts, Court pulled Sage into her arms and snuggled Sage's cheek against her soft breasts. She began stroking Sage's long red hair and cooing to her. "It will all be over tomorrow night. I have us booked on a redeye flight out of here at 2:00 a.m. after the awards ceremony."

"What if Huntley insists we stay, so she can parade us around?"

"She will have to find us first." Court chuckled. "A limo will be waiting for us at the back door. Whether we win or lose, we will walk from the stage to the ladies' room then slip out the back door. We will be home with Kinga and Jake before noon tomorrow."

Sage felt her body relax as Court stroked her, walking her fingers down her back, and coming to rest at the base of her spine. She began to purr contentedly as her wife massaged the area.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing to me?" Sage whispered undulating against Court.

"Yes, I do," Court chuckled. "I grew up with cats. Rubbing them where I'm touching you drove them crazy."

"You've always known just where to touch me," Sage breathed.

Court pressed the palm of her hand hard against the small of Sage's back. Sage moaned loudly. "You're driving me out of my mind."

"Hmm, all the better to have my way with you, my dear," Court murmured into her ear.

In one swift, move Sage straddled her wife’s abdomen, tangled her hands in Court’s blonde hair and captured her lips. “You belong to me, Court. Just me!”

Court couldn’t recall when the world fell away and all that remained was Sage’s lips, Sage’s tongue, and her hands touching her in a hundred places all at once. She bucked against the redhead wanting more of her—all of her—and Sage responded until Court slipped into darkness.

Court’s chest was still heaving as her lungs begged for air. She inhaled deeply trying to clear her head. “Sage, you have never . . . I’ve never—”

“Shush,” Sage breathed into her ear. “I warned you not to wake the sleeping beast.”

Court lay on her back letting tremor after tremor run through her body. No one had ever made love to her like that. *And I’m supposed to be teaching her*, she thought.

As the overwhelming ecstasy faded, Court realized that her shoulder was stinging. She touched the area with her fingertips and gasped at the blood on her hand.

“I may have bitten you,” Sage confessed. “I, um, lost control. You make me insane. I can’t get enough of you. I just want to—” A shudder racked her body.

“There’s no chance you will eat me, is there?”

Both women broke into laughter as they realized what Court had asked.

“Oh, most definitely,” Sage giggled, “but not literally.”

Sage raised on her elbow and kissed Court softly, her long red hair forming a wall around their faces shutting out the rest of the world. “You have no idea how much I love you,” she murmured against Court’s lips, the vibration felt good against Courts mouth.

“If you love me just half as much as I love you,” I am the luckiest woman in the world,” Court replied before pulling Sage’s lips against hers.

Chapter 3 – The Rich & Famous

“Give it a break,” Court yelled to the person pounding on their door. “Huntley, what time is it?”

“Thirty minutes *past* late!” Huntley huffed. “Don’t you two own an alarm clock or know how to request a wakeup call?”

Sage stumbled from the bedroom; the sheet clutched to her. “I’ll jump into the shower.”

“I’ll call for coffee.” Huntley turned on the lights and looked at them. “My God, you two look like death eating a cracker. Did you sleep at all last night? Never mind. That’s a stupid question. Get in the shower—one at a time—and hurry. Don’t worry about fixing your hair.”

Room service was knocking on their door by the time the women were walking into the room. “How do you get service so quickly?” Sage asked

“Because she scares the hell out of people,” Court answered. “She is the most intimidating person I’ve ever met.”

“Um-hmm, missy and if I didn’t, you’d still be trying to sell your first documentary.” Huntley reminded her.

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing.” Court grinned.

They carried their coffee and Danish to the limo as Huntley herded them to the car. A crowd was already gathering in front of the Dolby Theatre, home of the annual Academy Awards.

They moved through the fitting for their evening gowns and Huntley led them to the area where hairdressers were lined up at their stations to fix the participants hair.

“Where are all the movie stars?” Sage asked.

“They have their own clothes designers and hairstylist,” Huntley explained. “They will show up right on time looking perfect. It is all I can do to get your wife to attend these

career-building functions. I make everything as painless as possible for her.”

“It is much ado about nothing.” Court wrinkled her nose. “I’d be happier if they simply mailed my award to me.”

Sage studied her wife as the makeup artist began working on her. Court was a natural beauty. Flawless skin, thick blonde hair, and eyes as blue as any cloudless Texas sky she had ever seen. Sage secretly cheered whenever Court voiced her dislike of crowds and people fawning over her. Sage felt the same way. She was happiest when she was on the floor of their canyon home wrestling with Kinga, Jake, and her wife. They were content with one another.

##

Huntley watched as her friends made eyes at each other while the stylist fixed their hair. Both always opted for the casual style with their beautiful, long tresses floating on their shoulders. One only had to look at them to know how much they were in love with one another.

As the hairdressers pulled the capes from their subjects, Huntley stood and addressed them. “You have three hours before we must be backstage. We will have lunch at a wonderful restaurant in Beverly Hills then take a driving tour of the Walk of Fame and other Hollywood icons.”

“Why Beverly Hills?” Court asked as they followed Huntley to the limo.

“It is still the same wonderful, clean area it has always been. It has not been overrun with homeless people.”

The limo pulled from the curb and drove a short distance before Huntley announced, “FYI, we are passing the Walk of Fame now.”

“I can see the stars in the sidewalk,” Sage exclaimed. “Oh! Oh! Is that man—”

“Defecating on the sidewalk?” Court finished her wife’s sentence. “I don’t believe we will be visiting the Walk of Fame.”

“It is a shame how this area has deteriorated,” Huntley agreed. “The stench of urine and marijuana is unbearable.”

“We are now entering Beverly Hills,” Huntley announced trying to change the subject.

Sage looked around at the extravagant homes and perfectly manicured landscapes protected behind unscalable wrought iron fences. “This is lovely,” she muttered. “It’s as if we’ve driven into a different country.”

“We have,” Huntley agreed. “We have entered the world of the rich and famous.”

Chapter 4 – The Winner is

They had a leisurely meal and discussed the other documentaries Court was competing with for the Oscar. “I’ll be glad when this is over,” Court quipped. “I want to get back to work on my next project.”

“The Genesis Ark.” Sage beamed. “Court has some very controversial ideas about Noah’s Ark.”

“Care to share?” Huntley asked.

“Not really,” Court blurted. “I’m still forming my opinions on the existence of the ark.”

Huntley checked her watch. “It’s showtime ladies.” She paid the check and led the way to the limo. The agent’s phone rang as they pulled in front of the Dolby Theatre and Harrison Franklin’s photo flashed onto the screen.

“I’ll deal with Harrison after the awards ceremony,” Huntley said silencing her phone.

A few seconds later a text dinged into her cellphone. “This is urgent. I must speak with you or Courtney now!”

Huntley shoved her phone into her purse as the door of the limousine opened and all she could see was red carpet. “You go first,” she encouraged Courtney. “You’re the reason we’re here.”

Court stepped from the car then turned and offered her hand to Sage. Cameras zoomed in as a high-heel shoe emerged from the vehicle followed by a long slender leg then the other. Glorious red hair was tossed back over one shoulder as the owner stood and smiled into the cameras.

“Who is she?” Someone murmured.

“I don’t know but she is breathtaking,” another replied.

Court pulled Sage’s arm through hers and leaned down to whisper. “I believe you just stole my show.” She chuckled.

“I’m so sorry.” Sage frowned.

“Nonsense, I love it. Give them a treat, smile.”

Huntley drew little attention as the paparazzi followed the two gorgeous women up the steps to the theatre. Once inside, the agent took over leading them to their seats and greeting others along the way.

They sat down and looked around at the other attendees. “I’ve never seen so many beautiful people,” Sage whispered.

“None of them can hold a candle to you,” Court squeezed her hand. “You are beyond beautiful.”

“So are you,” Sage giggled. “When can we go home?”

“As soon as this is over.” Court leaned down and whispered in her ear. “I’m dying to kiss you.”

The lights lowered letting everyone know it was time to find their seats and sit down. The stage lights flared, and the band played as the mistress of ceremony walked to the microphone. She welcomed everyone and moved right into the awards presentations.

Court knew that the awards presentations for Best Documentary were early in the show to warm up the audience for the more glamorous Oscars such as the Best Actor and Actress, Best Director, etc. She was glad. She wanted to get it over with and take Sage home.

Sage slipped her arm through Courts and leaned against her shoulder. “Are you nervous?” She whispered.

“No.” Court answered honestly. She was thinking about her next project. She was through with God’s Canyon and excited about the Genesis Ark project.

“Darling, you won!” Sage squeezed her arm pulling her from her reverie. Sage stood pulling Court to her feet. “You won an Oscar,” Sage squealed.

Court clutched Sage’s hand leading her onto the stage with her. Someone shoved the Oscar into her hand and pushed her toward the microphone. It was at that very moment that she realized she had not prepared an acceptance speech. She hadn’t expected to win.

Clutching Sage's hand, she smiled and began to talk into the microphone. "My wife is with me on stage because she made it possible for me to produce "God's Canyon." She was my inspiration, and her knowledge of the Palo Duro Canyon was invaluable. There is one more woman in my life that I'd like to ask to join us. My amazing agent Huntley Carver. Huntley has been instrumental in steering my career in the right direction. I thank you Huntley Carver."

The audience applauded as Huntley joined them on the stage. Court held the trophy above her head. "Thank you, all of you. I am so honored." She handed the Oscar to her agent.

Huntley led the way from the stage and didn't realize Sage and Court weren't behind her until she sat down. "Looks like it's going to be just you and me in the photo session." She hugged the eight-pound statue to her.

Chapter 5 – Home at Last

Sage stretched and yawned as she realized she was sandwiched between Court and Kinga. She pushed her hips into Courts midsection as she hugged Kinga tightly. “Did you miss us big girl?” She purred to the panther and Kinga responded with a deep hum.

“You two sound like a motorboat,” Court exclaimed as she settled Sage against her body. “You just fit me.”

“Mm-hmm,” Sage agreed contentedly. “I was made for you.”

Court laughed and kissed down her wife’s neck to her bare shoulder. “You rub Kinga’s stomach. Jake and I will make coffee.” She nudged the Belgian Malinois who was laying against her back.

As the coffee gurgled into the carafe, Court turned on the television. She was surprised to see a photo of Sage and her holding the Oscar. A breaking news ribbon ran below the picture declaring, “Oscar Winner Courtney Southerland fired from Genesis Ark project.”

“What the hell?” she barked causing Jake to take an attack stance and growl menacingly.

“Easy boy, nothing is wrong. Just a shock before coffee.”

Sage joined her at the kitchen island and placed two cups beside the Keurig. She stared at the TV as the newscaster continued to read the statement that had been released by the Genesis Ark committee.

“They fired you?” Sage shrieked. “They didn’t even have the decency to call you!”

Court turned on her phone. “I have a dozen calls from Huntley. I turned off my phone last night. I didn’t want us to be interrupted.”

Almost on cue, the phone announced, “Huntley is calling.”

“Good morning,” Court answered.”

“Morning, it’s past 1:00 p.m.” Huntley quipped. “Not that it matters. I had a call this morning from the Genesis Ark people. “They are cancelling their contract with you.”

“Why?” Court scowled.

“Because you are a lesbian.”

Court took a deep breath fighting back all the curse words she didn’t want Sage to learn. “Seriously, who in this day and age cares about sexuality?”

“Christians,” Huntley snorted.

“No, Christianity has nothing to do with it,” Court declared. “It is because they know the ark isn’t there and I will prove it. I spoke to the committee chairman before the Academy Awards Ceremony, and I refused to falsify my findings if I failed to locate the ark.”

“They want their half million back,” Huntley informed her.

“Our contract says if either party drops out of the project, they must forfeit the deposit.”

“Yes, it does,” Huntley agreed. “But there are two little words that gives them an out.”

“What?”

“Moral turpitude!” Huntley huffed.

“Seriously, I didn’t know anyone used that excuse anymore.” Court closed her eyes trying to understand what was happening.

“They use it in all their contracts,” Huntly explained. “They define moral turpitude as a gross violation of standards of moral conduct, vileness. That leaves one’s conduct open to many interpretations. They interpret it to include “sexual acts between members of the same sex.”

“Huntley, I’ve spent the money. How soon do I have to return it?”

“They are giving us thirty days to send them a check then they intend to start legal proceedings against you.”

“Where are we on Harrison’s contract?” Court asked.

“Still in the negotiating stage. This will hamper our advantage tremendously.”

“Huntley, do you have your television on now?”

“Yes, I see what you are watching. Well, I’ll be damned. I just got my advantage back.” Huntley beamed as she watched the interview on the screen.

“I am Rita King and I represent the organization, Christians for Science,” a fiftyish brunette answered the newswoman’s question. “We believe in proving the Bible’s stories with scientific fact. We are trying to reach Courtney Southerland to ask permission to assume the contract from the Genesis Ark group since they have reneged on it.”

“Why would you do that?” the newscaster asked.

“We know that Ms. Southerland has done extensive research on the project, and we believe her to be capable of bringing unbiased and honest information to the table. We don’t want someone with preconceived notions. We want someone who will present us the hard, cold facts. So, Ms. Southerland, if you or your agent are watching this, please give me a call at the number on your screen.”

“I’m on this,” Huntley squealed. “I’ll call you back as soon as I have something.”

Chapter 6 – The Art of Negotiating

Huntley disconnected the call with Courtney, leaned back, and waited for her phone to ring.

The first call was from Trent Hamilton. She let it go to voicemail. The second call was from the Christians for Science Foundation. She let it go to voicemail. The third call flashed Harrison Franklin’s name onto her screen. She let it ring three times then answered. “Huntley Carver.”

“Huntley, I’ve been trying to reach you for the last twenty minutes,” Harrison blurted. “I don’t care what anyone else has offered to pick up the Genesis Ark project, I will double it and more if necessary.”

“Hello to you too, Harrison,” Huntley purred into the phone. “What are you babbling about?”

“I just saw on TV that the Genesis Ark folks have cancelled their deal with Courtney. I am next in line. I must be next in line. Time is running out for me.”

“What do you mean, time is running out?”

“I mean others have discovered the island and we must move quickly to secure it.”

“Don’t you have legal rights to the island?”

“Yes, ownership of the island has been in my family for four centuries,” Harrison said. “I’m not worried about proving my ownership of it. I’m worried about treasurer hunters and thieves. We need to establish a compound on it.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Huntley said. “Courtney has her heart set on exploring Mt Ararat.”

“Mt. Ararat isn’t going anywhere,” Harrison screamed. “My island won’t always be there. Price is no matter. She must document my island and the treasures we find on it. I will pay her a million dollars now I can wire it immediately and forty percent of everything we find on the island.”

“I don’t know, Harrison,” Court is primed for the Genesis Ark Project. She has been researching it for over a year. We have our airline tickets, passports, and clearances from the Turkish government.

“Huntley don’t play me for a fool. We both know she and Sage won’t be safe in a country where homosexuals are executed. “Two million, half today and fifty percent of whatever she uncovers. That’s my final offer.’

“I’ll draw up a contract and present it to Courtney,” Huntley said. “If she agrees, I’ll need your signature and we can begin working out the details on your island.”

“Fair enough,” Harrison replied.

“I do need some information on your island,” Huntley added. “Does it have electricity, communications, running water, and what is the accessibility?”

Harrison answered slowly, “No electricity or running water but we can rectify that with solar energy. Cell phones don’t work on the island. Remember it is in the center of The Devils Triangle. The island can be accessed via boat or helicopter. Boat is the safest. Choppers tend to crash.”

“How safe will Court and Sage be on the island?”

“To my knowledge, there are no dangers on the island. It isn’t inhabited by any life forms. The only danger would come from outside the island. Looters, pirates, anyone trying to locate the treasures before we do.”

“Are you going to establish a compound on the island and provide guards to protect them?”

“I’d rather not,” Harrison grumped. “The fewer people who know of our project, the better. I’m trying not to call attention to what I am doing.”

“I’ll call you if Court has any more questions.” Huntley ended the call already wondering what treasures the island might hold. She inhaled deeply and punched the number for her client.

“Court, I just spoke with Harrison,” Huntley blurted when the blonde answered.

“What did he say?”

Huntley relayed Harrison’s final offer.”

“Let me discuss it with Sage and do a bit of research. I’ll get back with you in a couple of hours,” Court replied.

Sage listened raptly as Court repeated Huntley’s message. Both sat silently thinking of the pros and cons of the offer.

“No bathroom or TV?” Sage scowled. “We will be cut off from the outside world. What will we live in? Does the island have caves where we can make a home?”

Kinga entered the room a low rumble came from her throat. Sage sat down on the floor and pulled the big panther into her lab. “I promise her and Jake steak for dinner tonight,” Sage explained.

“Do you mind taking care of dinner by yourself, baby? I need to do some research before giving Harrison an answer,” Court said opening her laptop.

##

“It is a cool, spring day. I thought we would eat on the patio,” Sage said, placing their meal on a tray with plates and a pitcher of lemonade. “The steaks are done. I’m going to take them off the grill.”

“I’m almost finished,” Court mumbled as Sage walked outside.

“Steaks are coming off the grill,” Sage called through the sliding glass door. “Get it while it’s hot.”

Court shut down her laptop and joined her wife at the railing around their patio. “This is beautiful,” she proclaimed.

“How did I get so lucky to marry someone who loves the canyon as much as I,” Sage said, lacing her fingers with Courts.

Court pulled her wife's hand to the lips and softly kissed the back of it. "I'm the lucky one," she responded.

King and Jake stared up at the two waiting for their dinner. Both emitted a deep guttural sound. "Someone is starving." Sage smiled patting the top of the two black heads waiting patiently.

Court held the plates as Sage placed the steak on each one then put a steak in each animal's bowl. Everyone sat down and began eating.

"I'm not happy about being on a deserted island with no communications or protection," Court spoke as she cut her steak. "I think I've found a solution that you might like. and it will work nicely for us."

"What?"

"A catamaran," Court replied.

"A catama . . . what?"

"A catamaran," Court repeated. "A Leopard 45 Sailing Catamaran, to be exact."

"What kind of animal is that?"

"Not an animal, a boat one can live on. I have pictures on my laptop. When we finish eating, I will show it to you."

Jake and Kinga wolfed down their dinner then darted from the patio running down the steep path to the river that ran through the bottom of the canyon. The frolicked in the water chasing each other.

"I thought cats didn't like water," Court commented watching Kinga outswim her dog against the river current.

"Kinga is a black Jaguar," Sage noted. "I think she is different from other felines. She loves water and can swim about fifty miles per hour."

"She is certainly giving Jake a run for his money."

"She is extremely strong," Sage said proudly. "She can swim long distances."

They gathered their dishes and condiments to take inside. "Let me show you my idea," Court said.

“I love it,” Sage squealed. “Can we go see one in person?”

“There is a dealership named West Texas Marine in Amarillo. We can go there in the morning if you want.”

“If we like it, can we get one,” Sage asked. “I mean do we have the funds to purchase one?”

“No,” Court shrugged, “but Harrison does, and he will buy it for us if we want us to do his documentary.”

Sage hugged herself. “I like the way you make things happen,” she said.

##

They arrived at the catamaran dealership right after breakfast the next morning. Court explained their needs and a slender young man led them to a huge boat.

“The Leopard 50 Catamaran Sailboat sounds like what you need,” the man recommended. “My name is Tyler.” He held out his hand and Court shook it. “Ma’am,” he nodded to Sage.

Sage stared in awe at the size of the ocean-going vessel. “This is huge,” she breathed.

“It is impressive,” Tyler agreed, “but wait until you see the inside.”

The interior of the Leopard 50 was a work of art done in grays and subtle blues. Sage and Court were speechless as Tyler pointed out the many wonderful things built into the boat.

“What is the price on this boat?” Court asked.

“A million and a quarter,” Tyler quoted.

“One million, two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars,” Sage repeated to make certain she understood the cost.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tyler drawled.

“Can you hold it for us?” Court asked. “We will be back tomorrow to either purchase it or release it. If we buy it, will you set it in the water at Galveston?”

Tyler considered Court's request.

"Or we could purchase the boat in Galveston," Court added.

"Oh, no, we can get it to Galveston for you. We launch boats for folks from there all the time. The Galveston Yacht Basin works closely with us. Amarillo isn't exactly an ocean-front city. We strive to accommodate our clients. Why don't y'all look around while I discuss this with my boss?"

They walked through the galley and Sage was fascinated with the kitchen. "Look at this," she exclaimed opening the door to the dishwasher. "There is a cooktop and refrigerator. Oh my gosh, there is freezer and oven. This is amazing."

Court followed her wife down the hallway leading to the master bedroom. *Wait for it*, she thought as Sage opened the door to their suite.

"Court," Sage growled her name in that slow, sexy way that demanded Court's attention. "Court, I want this boat. I want to make love to you on the ocean."

Court couldn't stop the tightening of her muscles that wrenched her body at the thought of making love with Sage in the middle of the ocean. *Yep, Harrison, you want me to do your documentary, buy me this boat.*

Chapter 7 – Buy Me a Boat

“She wants what?” Harrison exclaimed.

“It is a cheap solution to building a compound on the island and very low-key. No one will pay any attention to a catamaran anchored at the island,” Huntley encouraged him. “Court has reservations about how safe she and Sage would be alone on an island, cut off from the rest of the world. They have to live somewhere, Harrison.”

“One point three million,” Harrison repeated the price of the vessel. Can I have it when she is finished?”

“No, Sage wants it. This is a deal breaker.”

“As I told you in the beginning, money is no object. Have the dealership send me an invoice on it and tell them to register it however Court wants.”

“It is always a pleasure to do business with you,” Huntley complimented.

“Huntley, I expect Court and Sage on the island by Friday. I’m flying down in my helicopter, and they need to meet me there. I have things they need.”

“I’ll let her know. Say, is there any chance I can fly down with you?”

“That might be fun,” Harrison agreed. “Only a fool would turn down the company of a pretty woman. Oh, and now that we have a binding agreement, may I deal directly with Court?”

“I’ll email you the final contract, sign it and overnight it to me. I need your original signature in blue ink. When I receive it, Court is free to deal with you directly.”

##

Harrison wasted no time getting the contract back to Huntley. She received it the next day, double checked that all the T’s were crossed, and all the I’s were dotted, then she

called Harrison. “I’m giving you Court’s private number, don’t abuse it,” She warned Harrison.

“I just want to firm up our rendezvous spot on the island,” Harrison assured her. “I’ll call you to let you know when I’ll pick up you.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing your island,” Huntley added.

Harrison couldn’t call fast enough. “Hell-o,” a sultry voice answered the phone.

“Court?” Harrison questioned.

“No, who is calling?”

“Dr. Harrison Franklin. I need to talk to Courtney Southerland.”

“Oh, hell-o Dr. Franklin. This is Sage. Court is down in the canyon. May I have her call you as soon as she returns?”

“How long will that be?” Harrison grumped.

“About an hour.”

“Yes, please have her call me immediately. It is urgent.”

Sage terminated the call and headed for the bottom of the canyon to find her wife. She shrieked as she ran and was immediately answered by a louder scream from Kinga. She located her family quickly. Kinga raced to meet her followed by Jake and Court.

“Is everything okay?” Court asked breathlessly.

“Yes, Dr. Franklin just called and wanted to speak with you. He said it was urgent.”

“Everything Harrison does is urgent,” Court laughed, catching her wife in her arms, and swinging her around. “Sometimes you run so fast you are just a blur.”

“I couldn’t wait to be with you,” Sage informed her. “I know you have only been gone an hour, but I have missed you.”

Placing Sage’s feet on the ground, Court continued to hold her. “I’ve dreamed of a woman like you all my life. Who know I’d find you in Palo Duro Canyon?”

Sage tiptoed and kissed her wife. “I never dreamed anyone like you existed.”

“Let’s return Harrison’s call then we will have the rest of the night to ourselves,” Court suggested.

“I’d love that.” Sage brushed her lips across Courts before letting her go.

##

“Harrison, this is Court. Sage said you needed to speak with me immediately.”

“Court, thank you so much for returning my call. I guess we have an agreement, sign, sealed and delivered.”

“That is what Huntley told me.”

“It is imperative that I meet you on the island Friday.”

“There is no way I can be there by Friday,” Court responded. “And thank you for the boat, but I can’t possible get it to the island in any less than fourteen days and that is maintaining a constant cruising speed.”

“Surely you can go faster than that,” Harrison insisted.

“The top, continuous cruising speed on the Leopard Catamaran is six knots or seven and a half miles per hour. You must allow for refueling because it has a two-hundred-forty-three-gallon tank, and its maximum range is a little over a thousand miles.”

“It will go faster than that,” Harrison argued. “I read the specifications on it.”

“Yes, but the safe cruising speed is seven and a half miles per hour. We can’t run it wide open for a week.”

“What route are you taking?” Harrison demanded.

“Port Galveston to Port Nassau: one-thousand-four hundred-forty-eight miles. We will go from Port Nassau to your island which is about five hundred miles.”

“You must get there as soon as possible,” Harrison maintained. “I’ll have the boat put into the water at Port

Nassau. You and Sage fly to Nassau and pick up the boat there. Then you can reach my island in about three days.”

“We were planning on taking our dog,” Court said. “I take him everywhere I go especially strange places. He has saved my life more than once.”

“I must insist—”

“Harrison,” Court interrupted him. “I don’t understand the rush. The island will be there for the next hundred years. What difference will two more weeks make? I’m not going to run a boat wide open for twenty-four hours a day. It is dangerous. We have to sleep sometime.”

“But will you fly to Nassau and pick up the boat?”

“No, I want my dog.”

“Look, Court, I’ve given you everything you have asked for. I bought you the boat, so you’d feel safe. I’m begging you to please get to the island within a week. I’ll arrange for your dog to be delivered to you.”

“Let me think about it. Jake is too important to me to hand him over to a stranger. I need to discuss this with my wife.”

“Court, I’m not trying to be a hard ass,” Harrison pleaded. “It is imperative that you start work as soon as possible. Please?”

Chapter 9 – Leave Jake with Kinga

Sage trailed her fingers from the hollow of Court’s neck to her navel. “I was looking forward to having you to myself all alone in the middle of the ocean, boat gently rocking while we—”

“You’re killing me,” Court moaned.

Sage kissed between her wife’s breasts. “Who is it easier to say no to, Harrison or me?”

“Can we discuss this fully clothed and out of bed?” Court pleaded.

“We can discuss later,” Sage acquiesced, “but right now you need to make this bed rock gently. You know like a boat on the ocean.”

##

Sage huffed, trying to catch her breath. “You do rock my world,” she murmured.

Court lay beside her glorying in the way her wife made her feel. “You are incredible.” She turned on her side and nibbled at Sage’s ear.

“Are you ever going to let me—?”

“Not now,” Sage hissed. “I’m not ready for that.”

“Okay, you know it’s your decision.”

“I know. I will eventually. Just not now.”

Court pulled her into her arms and kissed the top of her head. “I love you.”

“Um and I adore you,” Sage mumbled against her lips.

“I’m going to dress and make hot chocolate.” Court said. “Want a cup?”

“With marshmallows?” Sage grinned sweetly.

“With anything you want,” Court promised.

“I’ll put some logs on the fire,” Sage volunteered pulling one of Court’s Henley’s over her head and inhaling deeply. “Um, I love the scent of you on your shirts.”

Court put on the water to boil and opened the patio door to greet the first frost of the year. Jake and Kinga pushed into the house. “I wondered if you two were going to roam the canyon all day,” she greeted them

Both ran to the fireplace and waited patiently for Sage to stoke the fire. When she had a nice flame going, she closed the fireplace screen and stepped back allowing the two animals to lie down in front of the roaring fire.

Court carried their chocolate into the office and turned on the computer. “Honey, Harrison is almost frantic for us to get to the island immediately,” she informed Sage. “I’m not certain why, but he acts as if it is a matter of life and death.

“We can fly to Port Nassau in a day, pick up the boat and make it to Harrison’s Island in five days. That will give us time to enjoy the boat and each other on the ocean.”

“How do you know about boats?”

“I’ve been around a bit. In college, I volunteered to join a crew searching for sunken treasure. That was a ‘learn quickly or drown’ situation. I knew how to scuba dive, but deep-sea salvaging is a whole new world.”

“Tell me about it.” Sage’s eyes gleamed as she settled into her chair to listen to her wife’s adventures.

“There is a lot of difference between snorkeling and SCUBA diving.”

“What does SCUBA stand for?” Sage queried.

“Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus because divers use breathing equipment that provides their air supply. SCUBA gear allows divers to go deep beneath the surface of the ocean.”

“Can we touch the floor of the ocean?” Sage beamed.

“Yes, we can.” Court chuckled at her wife’s enthusiasm.

“Will you teach me to SCUBA swim?”

“I can’t wait,” Court exclaimed. “I want to share every experience possible with you: water skiing, exploring sunken Spanish galleons, snow skiing. You name it. I want to do it with you.

“We will explore Harrison’s island and Scuba dive all around it. More than one ship has disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle and the island is right in the center of it.”

Sage hugged herself in excitement and laughed. “I do want to get there in a hurry. Tell Harrison, yes.”

“There is one problem. We can’t take Jake.”

Sage frowned. “That will be bad for us, but good for Kinga. She loves Jake and has bonded with him. She would be extremely lonely if all three of us left her alone in the canyon.”

“It’s settled, then,” Court slapped her thigh. “I’ll call Harrison right now and put his mind at ease.”

##

“Oh, thank God,” Harrison declared. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. I’ll fly to Miami today and arrange for the boat.”

“No, we promised the young man at West Texas Marine we would purchase the boat from him. His name is Tyler. He is expecting your call. They will have a boat waiting for us in the Port of Nassau. All you need to do is wire them the funds. They’ve already titled the vessel in our names. There will probably be an extra charge for getting it to Nassau.”

“I will do it right now,” Harrison promised.

“We are now the proud owner of a Leopard 50 Catamaran,” Court told Sage as she hung up the phone.

“You are so brilliant and knowledgeable in the ways of the world,” Sage praised her.

“So maybe you will let me—”

“Please, not yet,” Sage whispered.

Chapter 8 Two Attractive Women

Monday morning, Harrison called Court as the sun peeked above the horizon. “I wanted to tell you that I made a few adjustments to your boat,” he announced.

“Harrison,” Court grunted in disgust putting the man on the speaker so Sage could listen.

“Hear me out. I purchased you a Leopard 50P. It doesn’t have a fly bridge and she has a bigger lower boom providing you more sail to catch the wind, and the most powerful engine they make for a Leopard. I added every automation available. You can sail it from your iPad. She is specifically designed for ocean cruising. You can go around the world with her and across any ocean. She is faster, built like a tank, and still has the same living quarters and color scheme Sage wanted plus all the luxury of home.”

“What about Tyler at West Texas Marine?” Court asked.

“I arranged to make the purchase through them, but I got the boat directly from the manufacturer’s warehouse in Miami. It is already on its way to Nassau.

“Sounds great,” Court agreed.

“Good. “I’ve booked both of you on a 6:00 a.m. flight out of Amarillo in the morning. It gets into Nassau at 2:34 p.m. I will meet you when your plane lands and take you to the boat.”

“You are insane, Harrison Franklin. There is no way we can leave tomorrow. The airlines won’t allow me to check all the equipment I need to take with me. Give us a day to pack. I need all my cameras and—”

“Not a problem. I’m so excited, I wasn’t thinking. Take the next two days to pack everything you need and secure it in crates of chests. I’ll have my men pick them up Wednesday evening and we will fly them to the boat.

Thursday morning, I'll have my private jet pick you up at the Amarillo airport and fly you to Nassau where my men will meet you and transfer your things to the plane. You will be in Miami and sleeping on your boat Thursday night."

"I must purchase several things," Court insisted.

"What do you need?"

"Deep diving gear, scuba gear, the finest walkie talkies money can buy, two AK-47 rifles and enough ammunition to hold off an army."

"Are you expecting trouble?" Harrison queried.

"Two attractive women alone and defenseless in the middle of the ocean on an island that is abnormal," Court replied, "what could possibly go wrong. Get me a case of C4 too."

"Email me a list of everything you need," Harrison agreed. "I'll have it on the boat when you arrive.

"What do you want to name her?"

"Gran Felino," Court said without hesitation.

"Big Cat," Harrison translated. "Interesting name. I'll have her commissioned and ready to go when you arrive."

Court disconnected the call and Sage wrapped herself around her wife. "You named our boat Big Cat, after Kinga."

"And you," Court murmured embracing her.

"I love you so much, Court," Sage said as she captured her wife's soft lips. "I am so lucky you love me back."

"More than you will ever know," Court whispered against her ear. "We should take advantage of this moment. We will be running like crazy for the next two days."

"Then why are we wasting time talking? Take advantage of me, please."

##

Sage's eyelids opened slowly. They had made love and fallen into an exhausted sleep. "Baby, we should get up and start packing the equipment."

Court inhaled deeply taking pleasure in the scent and softness of her wife. “You take away my breath.”

“And you destroy my better judgement, but not today. We have work to do.” Sage rolled out of Court’s arms and leaped to her feet. I want to see our new boat.”

They spent the next two days packing their recording and editing equipment into crates. “We need food,” Sage declared.

“We can grocery shop in Miami,” Court said. “There is a freezer and fridge on the boat so we can stock up on fresh and frozen foods.”

“Will the island have pineapples and coconuts or maybe bananas?”

“Honey, I have no idea what this mysterious island has,” Court confessed. “I honestly do not know what we are getting into. I’ve studied the maps and read some of the ancient journals Harrison gave me, but I don’t have a clue about the island.

“The journals are about finances, raids and stealing wenches. I’m afraid pirates had little regard for females.”

“Wenches?” Sage questioned.

“That is what they called women. When they raided a village or took over a ship, especially a passenger ship, they treated the women abominably. Pirates were heathens for the most part.”

Knowing their humans were leaving them alone, Kinga and Jake followed them every step they took wanting to be close to them before they left.

“We need to drive into town and give Debbie the keys to the house,” Court said. “I could feed you cake.”

“I would like some of Debbie’s cake before we leave,” Sage agreed.

“Let’s check our list one more time then seal the crates for Harrison’s men to pick them up tomorrow, then we can drive into town and have dinner at Debbie’s Diner.”

“We need to run by the meat market and make certain he understands how Venmo operates,” Sage reminded her. “I know you set up his account for him, but it might be a good idea to actually transfer a few hundred dollars into the account and show him how it works.”

“Good idea.” Court grinned. “and everyone thinks I married you for your incredibly good looks when it was your mind that attracted me all along.”

“You were extremely patient with me,” Sage noted. “I love you for resisting my advances.”

“Thank heaven, I no longer have to do that.”

They double checked everything, locked, and sealed the crates then lugged them to the front door. “That is finished,” Court grunted as she lowered her end of the crate. “All we must do tomorrow is pack our clothes and personal items and get Debbie settled in the guest bedroom so she will be here when we depart Thursday morning. Hopefully that will make it easier on our babies.”

“Babies,” Sage echoed. “I love how you call Jake and Kinga our babies.”

“They are our babies!” Court shrugged. “Now how about dinner? I’m starving.”

Chapter 9 – Leaving Texas

“Here are our wandering friends now,” Debbie said to a brown-haired woman sitting at the counter and drinking iced tea.

“We came by to give you the keys to the house and last-minute information,” Court informed her. “We must leave Jake with you. We can’t take him on the plane.”

“I love that,” Debbie exclaimed. “Jake makes me feel safe. You two do live in the middle of nowhere hanging over the edge of the canyon. It is a little spooky, but I love your home.”

The woman at the counter sipped her coffee then cleared her throat. “Oh, where are my manners?” Debbie blushed. “Sage and Court, I’d like you to meet Ruby Lane. Ruby and I are dating.”

“It is so nice to meet you,” Sage held out her hand and Ruby shook it.

“It is always great to meet a friend of Debbie’s,” Court added.

“We came for dinner and cake.” Sage beamed. “We have to leave early Thursday morning and we thought we’d have one of your delicious homecooked meals before we leave.”

“We also thought you might want to spend the night at our place Wednesday night and get settled before we go,” Court added. She didn’t miss the shy glance between Debbie and Ruby.

“You’re welcome to bring a friend to stay with you while we are gone. It can get lonely with only Jake for company,” she added.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like that,” Debbie agreed. “Now you two sit down and I will serve you the best meal you have ever eaten.”

After dinner they stopped by the meat market and picked up food for Kinga and Jake. Court showed the owner how to manage Venmo. “Just text me the bill at the end of each month and I’ll send the money directly to your bank account,” she promised.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever seen,” the man beamed.

##

It was almost midnight when they returned home. Court noticed that Sage was restless. “I’ll unload our purchases. Why don’t you spend some time with Kinga before we leave?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Sage asked. “I need to run with Kinga one last time before we depart.”

“I don’t mind, honey. Go!”

Sage streaked around the house, emitting a shrill scream that was immediately answered from the canyon floor. Court carried the groceries inside and put everything away before moving to the telescope on their patio to watch her wife and the black panther cavort in the lazy river winding through the canyon.

“They are beautiful,” she whispered to herself as the two streaked up the side of the canyon and leaped the railing onto the patio.

“Both of you are truly nature’s finest works of art.” Court laughed as Sage wrapped her arms around her, lifted her from the deck and swung her around.

“Shower with me,” Sage insisted.

“Umm, you are a mind reader, darling.”

##

Both women awoke before sunrise Thursday morning, dressed, and carried a cup of coffee onto their deck. They watched in awe as the sun highlighted the splendor of the canyon, filling it with every color of the spectrum.

“I love our home,” Sage breathed already homesick.

“I know,” Court agreed. “It is difficult to leave all this beauty.”

Debbie joined them carrying a glass of orange juice. “I see why you love it here,” she muttered as she watched the sun wash the canyon with color. “It is breathtaking.”

“Yes,” Sage whispered reverently.

“I’ll get our things in the pickup while you say one last goodbye to everyone,” Court volunteered.

“I’m off,” Debbie said. “If I don’t have the restaurant open and serving food before seven, I’ll have plenty of angry cowboys milling around my parking lot.”

Sage waited for Debbie to leave then trilled for Kinga. The big cat bounded onto the deck and dashed into the living room where she reared on her hind legs and placed her paws on Sage’s shoulders. The redhead wrapped her arms around Kinga and buried her face in the animal’s silky fur. “You give the best hugs,” she declared squeezing the panther tightly.

Court stopped in the doorway and overcame the urge to take a picture of her wife and Kinga. It was best such photos never existed.

Jake sat at Court’s feet. She dropped to her knees and began stroking his back and scratching between his ears. The dog whimpered.

“I don’t like leaving you behind either, big fellow.” She hugged him and stood. “We will return often to check on you two.”

Court didn’t comment on the tears in Sage’s eyes. She knew that leaving Kinga behind was always difficult for her wife.

Chapter 10 – Nearly to Nassau

They landed at a private airfield in Miami and were greeted by Harrison. “I am so pleased you have agreed to do this for me,” he enthused as his men moved their luggage from the plane to a black Cadillac SUV.

“This is certainly a whirlwind beginning,” Court replied. “I’m sure I’ll find I’ve left half of what I need behind. By the time you meet us here next month, I’ll have a list of everything I need to do justice to your documentary. I must admit, I’m getting more and more excited.”

Harrison smiled, pulled an aluminum case from the back of the vehicle, and showed it to Court. “I wanted to deliver this to you myself,” he said. “It contains never seen diaries of Captain Elgin Dawson and letters between him and Lisa Hayward. There are maps and directions to gold bullion Wainwright salvaged from a Spanish frigate as it was sinking. You should read it while you cruise to Harrison Island.”

“We will,” Court promised eager to explore the ancient manuscript.

“I can’t wait to see the boat.” Sage hugged herself in excitement as the SUV pulled from the airfield.

Sage’s eyes grew bigger as they turned into the private marina where several large cruisers were docked. Her eyes instantly spotted the one named Gran Felino. “Big Cat,” she breathed. “It is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Harrison beamed. “It will be your home for the next year or so.”

“Good morning,” a young Adonis in slacks and a vented short-sleeved shirt greeted them as they stepped from the car. “I’m Randy Scott. I’m here to familiarize you with the Leopard.”

Sage sucked in her breath. *What a beautiful name for a beautiful boat*, she thought.

Randy smiled certain that he had taken away the gorgeous woman's breath.

"Are you the proud new owner of this beauty?" Randy asked as he held out his hand to help Sage step onto the boat. "I could make time to give you additional lessons."

"My wife and I are," Sage replied.

"Oh." Randy deflated when he realized the two beautiful women were together.

"Sorry, old boy," Court grinned mischievously. "Better luck next time."

"Why don't we begin with a quick tour," Randy recovered. "This boat has everything you would find in an upscale home. This is the utility room with stacked washer and dryer. A sink and clothes rod are on the other side along with a closet for cleaning items which have already been stocked for you. Spacious bathroom and closets provide plenty room seldom found on boats. Everything electric, including the central air system is powered by solar panels. You have your master bedroom, a guest bedroom and here is the bedroom you had installed as an office."

"Oh, Court, this is so exciting," Sage gushed. "I love the way you designed the desk so both of us could have access to the huge monitor."

Randy moved the tour quickly, finishing at the helm station.

"Here is your control center for this big cat," he announced. "All rigging lines and controls for the sails and motors are at your fingertips. The monitors are self-explanatory and the radio and running lights are all accessible from here."

"This is incredible, Harrison," Court complimented. "Thank you. This is so much more than I expected."

"Only the best for you." Harrison beamed.

Randy cocked his head trying to recall where he had seen the blonde. “You’re that woman on TV,” he blurted. “You’re on that—”

“Cooking show,” Harrison interrupted.

“Yeah, that cooking show,” Randy repeated.

“Will you take us out for a trial run?” Court asked moving Randy away from the name game.

“I’d be delighted. Why don’t you hop into the captain’s seat, and I’ll just stand here beside you just in case you need my help.”

“Thank you. Honey why don’t you sit in the chair next to me so we can learn everything together?” Court smiled at Sage.

##

After three hours of letting the sails up and down, putting the boat through maneuvers, dropping anchor, and backing it, both Court and Sage began to feel comfortable with their new home.

“Remember, if you drop anchor in the middle of the ocean at night, be sure to get out of the traffic lanes and leave on your running lights so others can see you.” Randy cautioned them as he pulled the Gran Felino into the marina.

“Thank you, Randy,” Harrison said. “I’d appreciate it if you would top of the gasoline tanks and the water tanks while I take the ladies to eat. I’m sure you must be famished.” He turned to Court and Sage. “And I want to give you the case.”

Court nodded and they followed Harrison to his vehicle. “I’d like to get times and dates for our next rendezvous,” she said.

They dined and agreed to meet at the marina in thirty days. “May first,” Harrison added the date to the personal calendar on his cellphone. Court did the same.

How good is the radio communication system on the boat?” Court asked.

“The VHS is short range, up to fifty miles. I splurged and added HF-SSB transceivers that have a three-thousand-mile range. So, you will have no trouble calling for help if you need it.”

“That is good to know,” Sage said.

“If you experience no weird electrical storms or interference with your radio signals, contact me,” Harrison instructed. “If the tales of the Bermuda Triangle are just fantasy, we should be able to come to you via helicopter instead of you wasting four or five days at sea.”

“I would like that.” Court nodded.

“Well, I guess we are ready to shove off,” Court announced. “Thank you for everything, Harrison and I feel certain we will give you one heck of a documentary.”

##

Randy was waiting for them at the boat. “Do you need help get her out of the marina?” he asked.

“I think we can handle it,” Court assured him.

“I’ve entered the latitude and longitude for you,” Harrison informed her. “I didn’t trust it to anyone else. Just stay the course, you should see it in about four or five days depending on how fast this big cat can run.”

They boarded the boat as Randy tossed their tie downs onto the deck. “Start her and go,” he yelled.

Court suddenly felt inadequate and hoped she would remember all the information Randy had provided. Sage sprang up the stairs to the cockpit, cranked the boat, and eased it out of its slip.

“Damn, she is good,” Court muttered under her breath as a wave of admiration and desire for her wife swept over her.

Sage slowly moved the boat forward until they cleared the marina and were in open water then she opened the throttle. She threw back her head and trilled into the wind. It was a sound Court had not heard outside the canyon. It was wild and free and fearless.

Court climbed to the cockpit and stood behind her wife. She had overwhelming urge to wrap her arms around Sage and cling to her.

“Sit,” Sage commanded motioning toward the empty seat beside her. “I love this.”

Court leaned down to kiss her cheek then slid into the chair beside her. “This is exciting. I never dreamed you’d be the captain of this ship.”

Sage grinned. “Captain Sage. Captain Southerland.” She sing-sang the phrase. ‘It has a nice ring to it. Captain Southerland.’

Court began to sing, “Captain Southerland had a boat, e-i-e-i-o.”

Sage snapped her head around to stare at her wife. “What is e-i-e-i-o?” She demanded.

“A nursery rhyme from the early seventeen hundreds.” Court began singing. “Old McDonald had a farm, e-i-e-i-o.”

Sage shook her head still not understanding. “Tell it to me.”

Court sang the entire traditional children’s song, then Sage joined in as she repeated it. “We harmonize beautifully,” Court declared.

Sage just smiled. She didn’t understand harmonize, but whatever it was she enjoyed it with her wife. She would ask Court later when they cuddled in bed.

The sun seemed to disappear. They were sailing in one direction, and it was traveling in the opposite direction. “We should get out of the high-trafficked lanes and drop anchor for the night,” Court suggested.

Sage keyed in information on the ship's computer and set a course toward a less traveled area. "It is so black out here," she noted. "Black and warm much like our canyon."

"It gives me the willies," Court muttered. "I'm not a fan of the ocean. Give me a canyon anytime over the deep blue sea."

Sage cocked her head and grinned. "Willies. What are willies?"

"An overpowering feeling of apprehension," Court answered. "I don't feel as in control on the ocean as I do on dry land."

"I understand. I have the willies to."

"Let's lower the sails, drop anchor, turn on all our running lights, and call it a night." Court said.

"I'd like that," Sage agreed flipping on all their exterior lights to alert approaching vessels of their presence.

Court watched as she electronically lowered the sails and then pressed the button that would drop the anchor. They secured the boat then went to the section that housed their ensuite and bedroom. "This is so roomy," Sage noted. "I never expected to have this much room."

"I know. It will make living on a boat much more inviting," Court agreed.

Chapter 11 – The Diaries

Friday, Day 1

Sage awoke to the gentle rocking of the boat and took a minute to acclimate herself to her surroundings. She wrapped herself around Court who was slumbering peacefully. They had been together for six years. Two as friends, and four as a married couple. Life with Court was exciting and glamorous. But her favorite part of all was the peaceful days they spent in their home overlooking Palo Duro Canyon, where she had spent the first sixteen years of her life. A pang stabbed her heart as she thought about Kinga, the panther that had adopted her when she was born and raised her as her own cub. She missed Kinga but she knew she would be more miserable without Court.

Court stirred beside her, and Sage pulled the blonde tighter into her. “I could stay like this forever,” Court mumbled.

“It is so quiet,” Sage whispered into her ear. “I can barely hear the lapping of the water against the boat.”

“I can’t hear anything,” Court admitted. “Except the beating of my heart when you push yourself against me.”

She turned in Sage’s arms and pressed their lips together. “I love you.”

“I love you more,” Sage started their never-ending argument about who loved the most.

“I am pretty wonderful,” Court teased. “But I’m not special like you.” She slipped her arm around her wife and massaged the small of her back. Sage purred softly; a sound Court loved.

“Do you know what you are doing?” Sage murmured breathlessly.

“I do,” Court muttered against her lips. “Since we are out in the middle of the ocean where no one can hear or see us, would you let me—”

Sage inhaled deeply. “I’m not ready for that, Court. I will in time, just not right now.”

“Okay.” Court continued to massage her back as she nipped at her lips. “I’m sure I can find other things to do with you.”

“I’m counting on it.” Sage smiled as she rolled her wife onto her back and straddling her.

“God, you have the most beautiful breasts,” Court declared.

##

Later Court cuddled Sage as she fell asleep. “You always go to sleep after we make love,” she whispered into Sage’s ear, but the redhead was already slumbering.

Court slowly slid from their bed and stumbled to the galley to make coffee. Once the coffee maker began brewing, she walked to the cockpit and raised the anchor. She turned off the exterior lights and touched the monitor screen resetting the boat on its original route to the island. Setting everything on automatic, she double checked her latitude and longitude verifying they were on course for the island.

A brisk wind caught the sails as she raised and positioned them to take advantage of the free energy. The boat moved smoothly across the water.

Confident that all was right with the catamaran, she turned to look down on the deck. Sage was sitting on the cushions along the boat rail, beckoning her to come get her coffee. *How did I ever get so lucky?* Court thought.

“I thought we’d have our coffee then I’ll cook breakfast,” Sage informed her. “Thank you for letting me sleep.”

“It will take us four days to reach the island,” Court noted. “I thought we would catch all the wind possible and drop anchor a couple of hours before sundown.”

“Why so early?”

“So we can swim in the ocean.”

“Aren’t we inside the Devil’s Triangle?” Sage frowned.

“Yes, but all the tales people keep relating to you are just horror stories. None of it has been substantiated.”

“What is in the ocean?” Sage queried.

“Fish-all kinds of fish.”

Sage nodded, stood, and held out her hand to Court. “Talk to me while I cook breakfast.”

Court followed her wife into the galley and pulled Harrison’s aluminum case from the space beneath the seating wrapped café style around a table. “Do you mind if I look over the diary of Elgin Dawson?”

“Not at all.”

Court discovered Harrison had placed the diaries in chronological order and numbered them with sticky notes. She began silently reading, but quickly included Sage in her activity.

“Listen to this, honey.” She began to read out loud.

January 4, 1655 – The Earl of Hayward caught me with his daughter last night. He had me stripped to the waist and tied to the whipping post in the center of the round pen where he personally lashed my back twenty times in front of onlookers. I fear I will not recover from this beating. My beloved Lisa ran to me begging him not to kill me. He lashed her across the face laying open the flesh on her cheek. I will kill you I screamed, and he resumed beating me as servants took Lisa away.”

“That is awful,” Sage declared. “Who is writing that?”

“The Pirate Elgin Dawson,” Court replied. “Obviously, he did survive as there are many diaries with his handwriting.”

“Read more,” Sage insisted.

“The next entry is January 29, 1655,” Court said.

“Thanks to Munster I am half alive. He has nursed me and prevented an infection from forming in my wounds. He administers to me daily. He is like a brother to me. He insists on massaging my back daily with lamb’s oil to keep the scars at bay as much as possible. My back is stiff, and it hurts to move but I will live. The Earl will pay for this.

“I must get a message to Lady Lisa. She will be distraught and surely believes me dead.

“**February 14, 1655.** I rode my horse today. My back is still tender but improves daily. I will begin fencing lessons next week. I am preparing myself to seek my revenge on Earl Hayward.”

“**Mach 2, 1655.** I met a pirate today. He steals from the likes of Earl Hayward and Duke Dupont. He has consumption and is looking for someone to buy his boat and crew. I must speak with Munster. He is strong as an ox, meaner than the devil, and loyal as a dog. If he helps me, I will purchase the boat. I think a pirate’s life will become me. But first, we must rob from the rich to buy the boat.”

Sage placed their plates onto the table. “Read,” she urged.

“Let’s eat then we can go to the cockpit where we can observe everything. I will read to you there,” Court promised.

“I wonder what happened to him,” Sage mused, “and who was he having an affair with?”

“What makes you think he was having an affair?” Court asked.

“Because he was beaten. Obviously, he was with someone who was off limits to him.”

“Remember he was English. They had and still have a stringent caste system,” Court explained. “He probably was a lowlife who dared to put his hands on an Earl’s daughter.”

Sage placed the dishes into the dishwasher as Court gathered two of the journals and they headed for the boat deck. The sea breeze was moving the Gran Felino at a fast pace, so they selected seating in the corner of the cockpit to protect them from the wind.

“Read,” Sage blurted.

“That is all you want me for,” Court teased. “To feed you cake and read to you.”

“Um, and that other thing you do so well,” Sage purred snuggling into her.

“What other thing?” Court pulled her onto her lap and kissed her.

“You know.” Sage giggled. “You like it too.”

Court laughed.

“Read to me!” Sage insisted.

“I’ve created a monster,” Court pouted secretly delighted that her wife wanted to know about Elgin as much as she did.

“**April 15, 1655.** A trusted friend delivered my letter to Lisa, but she has not responded. Never mind, when I have my boat, I will go for her.

“Tonight, we will rob the king’s carriage carrying a shipment of gold to pay the soldiers. Then I will buy my boat.”

“**April 16, 1655.** Munster and I hijacked the king’s carriage when the escort stopped to relieve themselves. It was quite funny to see them chasing after their carriage with their trousers around their ankles. I will meet with the captain today and complete my transaction to become the owner of a pirate ship. Munster will be my quartermaster. Although I am a little over six feet with my shoes on, Munster is six-foot, five inches and scary as hell. His broad shoulders sometimes block out the sun and he is stronger than a team of oxen.”

“Look, baby, here is a sketch Elgin made of his ship.”
Court held the diary so Sage could see.

Sage nodded her head encouraging her wife to continue reading. “I wish there was a drawing of Munster.”

“**April 17, 1655.** The captain did not tell me his crew had mutinied. Munster and I were met with great hostility this morning when we boarded the ship. If not for my friend, I fear I would have been thrown overboard.

“After Munster tossed five troublemakers into the bay, and I drew two pistols, the others backed away from us and listened. I asked if there was a reason for their mutiny and was told the former captain had taken their booty into town to sell it and bring back the money that was to be divided among them. He failed to return. Now I understand why I was able to purchase the ship so cheaply

“I inquired about the money owed them and they all agreed on a sum that would make them happy to serve under me.”

“We need supplies before we can go to sea,” yelled a man I later learned was the boatswain responsible for the ship’s repairs and supplies.

“The boatswain agreed to accompany Munster into town to gather supplies. All the men were as ragtag as gutter rats. Instead to dividing the booty from a raid, I offered to pay them monthly with real gold. They quickly accepted my offer. I gave each of them half a month’s pay to go into town and purchase clothes that would cover their body.

“**May 19, 1655.** We lurked along the Eurasian trade routes, robbing ships returning from South America and New Spain. Their return cargos weren’t so rich, but they carried gold paid to them for slaves they had delivered. Most of the ships leaving Africa carried slaves. We caught them on the return trip and relieved them of their gold. We must find a place to put to shore soon. Our ship is overweight with gold. I miss Lisa more than ever.

“June 1, 1655. A vicious storm blew us off course last night. We have confiscated the best sailing charts in existence, but our navigator can’t pinpoint our location in the Atlantic Ocean. We are somewhere between Cape Verde, Africa, and Haiti.”

“June 10, 1655. We have been tossed about by raging winds and mountainous swells. Our compass is whirling like a top and the winds are howling like creatures from the bowels of hell. I fear we may capsize, and I will die without ever seeing Lisa again.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Sage squealed. “They must be in the Devil’s Triangle.”

Court closed the diary. “We should get our nose out of a book and enjoy this wonderful weather and the ocean.”

“I wonder what happened to Lisa,” Sage puzzled as they settled onto a cushion on the deck of the boat.

“I’m sure we will find out,” Court assured slipping her arm around Sage and snuggling her into her side.

Sage watched a flock of seagulls flying behind their boat. “Are they following us?” She asked nervously.

“They’re stealing a ride.” Court laughed. “Our boat creates an upward air draft, and they are floating on it. Notice they aren’t flapping their wings just coasting on the air.”

Sage stretched out on the bench and put her head in Court’s lap. “Read to me.” She begged.

Court opened the diary eager to get back to Elgin’s story.

June 15, 1655. I believe we are floating around in a circle. We are completely lost and have no direction. Our supplies are getting low, and the men are becoming querulous. Munster was forced to knock out a mate’s tooth last night to calm him down. I don’t think anyone else will challenge my friend.”

June 19, 1655. The lookout spotted land from the crow's nest. He is directing us toward it. No one else has seen land and I pray he isn't hallucinating.

June 20, 1655. The men are celebrating. A small island is in sight. We are sailing as close as we dare and will swim the rest of the way to the beach. I have sent out a four-man search party and am awaiting their return. My navigator has roughly determined our position. I give you the location so you may find it if per chance I fail to return. Latitude: 25° 00' 0.00" N. Longitude: -71° 00' 0.00" W."

"Court," Sage gasped. "That is the information Harrison entered into our navigation system. They were on Harrison's Island right in the center of the Devil's Triangle. They must have died there. We will find their bones. That will be a major coup for your documentary."

"Yes, it would my brilliant wife." Court kissed her lightly. "But I suspect they got off the island or we wouldn't have these diaries."

Chapter 12 – Secrets of the Ocean

“Let’s get out of the shipping lanes and drop anchor,” Court suggested closing the diary.

Sage sat up, pulled her wife to her feet, and hugged her tightly. “I love you,” she declared.

Court smiled and pulled her closer for a kiss. Sage leaned back in her arms. “Let’s swim, then you can read to me while I make dinner.”

“Or I could make dinner while you read to me,” Court said.

“You read. I love the sound of your voice.”

“Whatever makes you happy,” Court agreed.

Court steered the boat to a safe location then dropped anchor. “I’m going to lower the diving platform,” she yelled.

Sage looked over the side of the ship and began screaming. “A creature! A creature, Court,” A hiss came from deep in her throat as she dropped to all fours.

“It’s not a creature,” Court shouted. “It is safe.”

Still in attack mode Sage swung her head toward Court, who realized her wife was morphing. “It is a gentle fish,” she shouted. “It isn’t dangerous.”

Sage dropped her head and turned her face away from her wife. Within a few seconds she was standing upright and in Court’s arms. “What is it? Look, there are more.”

“It is a bottlenose dolphin,” Court answered. “They are extremely intelligent and friendly. They travel in groups call pods.” She walked to the diving platform and hung her feet into the water. The dolphins swam around her legs butting her feet with their nose.

“Is it safe to get into the water with them?” Sage asked hesitantly sitting by Court and sliding her feet into the ocean.

When Sage’s feet dropped into the water, a dozen dolphins went crazy, leaping from the water and making

shrieking sounds like a tiny baby wailing. A deeper, intermittent sound came from older dolphins and a loud squawking noise joined the cacophony of racket. The sound rose and fell as the dolphins gathered around Sage's feet.

"Will they bite me?"

"No," Court answered, "but I don't know what is going on. Don't get into the water."

The uproar slowly quieted to a low hum. The dolphins purred like Kinga and Sage. "I think they identify with me," Sage said. "They are gently rubbing against my legs and feet. I'm going to slip into the water."

"Don't," Court barked but it was too late her wife was already beneath the water.

When Sage surfaced the Dolphins circled her with their beaks pointed to her. She reached out with both hands and softly stroked each one's nose. They chattered around her like excited baby birds.

"Can you communicate with them?" A dismayed Court asked.

Sage began mimicking the sounds of the dolphins who began swimming in circles around the catamaran.

"What did you say?" Court whispered.

"I have no idea. Certainly not 'swim circles around our boat.' In my mind I thought 'I love you' as I made the squeaking sounds."

As Court and Sage talked the dolphins gathered at the diving platform. "Come in the water," Sage encouraged Court.

"As long as they don't challenge me for you," Court joked half-heartedly.

Sage gasped as one of the larger dolphins swam between her legs and lifted her from the water. The dorsal fin supported the center of her back keeping her from sliding off. She tightened her legs around the aquatic mammal as it headed out to sea.

“Oh no, you don’t” she said loudly as she dove of its back and began swimming back to the boat. The dolphin shrieked so loudly she thought her ears would bleed. She almost panicked when the entire pod surrounded her. Then she saw a huge fin moving slowly toward them.

“Now you are going to get it,” she scolded the dolphin. “Your mother is coming for you.”

To her surprise the dolphins formed a barrier between her and the oncoming fin. “Shark!” Court screamed. “Get back to the boat.”

Sage dove deep into the ocean and was horrified to see the size of the fish bearing down on the dolphins. The shark hit the smaller mammals and scattered them like bowling pins. He opened his jaws to swallow a smaller dolphin.

Sage leaped landing on the back of the shark. She dug in her claws and sank her teeth into the thing’s back. The shark leaped from the water trying to dislodge its rider, but Sage was locked onto it.

“Dear God,” Court breathed. “She’s morphed.”

Sage used her teeth to rip open the shark’s back. The predator lunged from the water, twisting in midair and diving deeper into the ocean. The dolphins clamored around its head pushing it up to the surface. Sage gasped for air and released her grip on the shark. The dolphins formed a platform beneath her and returned her to the diving platform behind the boat. The shark disappeared.

Sage lay motionless, her sides heaving spasmodically. Her pleading eyes locked with Courts and the blonde walked slowly away from her.

Chapter 13 – The Deep Blue Sea

Court placed their dinner on the table and was pouring tea over ice when Sage entered the galley. “I have prepared our meal,” she said.

“Thank you,” Sage muttered bursting into tears. “I’m sorry.”

Court wrapped her arms around her wife. “For what?”

“For changing,” Sage whispered. “When that monster hit those little dolphins, I had to help.”

“He was after you.” Court declared. “If you hadn’t reacted so quickly, he would have had you for dinner.”

“Were any of the dolphins hurt.

“None of them were injured. Dolphins are very flexible mammals.”

“I’m thankful for that,” Sage said.

They ate their dinner then walked to the top deck of the ship. “It is so peaceful out here,” Court noted. “It is hard to recall the life or death struggle a short time ago.”

“The sea holds many surprises,” Sage declared. She laced her fingers through Courts and kissed her wife’s knuckles. “Thank you for not watching me.”

“I would never do that without your permission,” Court promised. “I know how you feel about morphing.”

“I’m not completely comfortable with it yet.”

“You should practice doing it once or twice a day,” Court suggested. “It is a part of you. You shouldn’t suppress it.”

“At least I can control it,” Sage pointed out. “Only extreme emotion would make me lose control.”

Court secretly wished Sage would lose control during their love making. She knew her wife was always careful to control the animal in her.

“What I can’t control is my need for you,” Sage murmured pushing Court onto a soft cushion. “I love you so much.”

Court was normally the aggressor but tonight Sage took control. She licked and sucked Court until the blonde was begging for relief. Sage turned her wife onto her stomach and began kissing her ankles slowly moving up her long legs to the spot where her thighs met.

“Oh, God,” Court screamed throwing her head back. Sage pressed her into the cushion as she licked her.

“You like this,” Sage purred.

“So much,” Court whimpered. “I need more, please.”

She tried to turn over, but Sage held her, firmly placing a hand on her left shoulder so she couldn’t move away from her and a paw on the right shoulder as she continued to lick her into a frenzy.

A paw! Sage looked from one shoulder to the other and realized her paws were holding Court in place.

“It’s okay,” Court gasped. “Please, don’t stop with the tongue.”

Sage reveled in Court’s screams as she begged for more of her. Her long red hair fell across her face as she took Court into oblivion. She fell onto Courts back nipping her neck. “Mine,” she whispered. “You are mine,” Court.”

“I know,” the blonde whimpered.

##

The sun shone brightly on the two naked women sleeping on the upper deck of the catamaran. Sage wrapped around Court and pulled her buttock into her mons pubis rubbing it against Court’s smooth cheek.

“If you are using me to masturbate, Ill be very upset,” Court teased turning over to face her. “At least let me rub against you too.”

Dark Justice: Book #2 – Garden of Eden by Erin Wade

Loud chattering and squealing filled the air. “What the hell?” Court jumped to her feet. “I think your admirers are back.”

Sage moaned loudly. “Can we take this to our bedroom?”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Court grinned pulling her wife to her feet.

Chapter14 – Sea Creatures

Saturday, Day 2

An exuberant Sage bounced onto the bed. “Time to get up sleep head.” She laughed as her wife turned over onto her back and stretched.

“I’d stretch a mile,” Court retorted, “if I didn’t have to walk back.”

Sage laughed. “You say some of the strangest things,” she chided her wife. “I have fresh coffee and breakfast ready. I will put everything on the table while you get us back on course.”

“Sounds like a deal to me,” Court quipped jumping out of bed to grab her wife who eluded her and ran squealing into the galley.

Court followed her, kissed her on the cheek, grabbed a cup of coffee, and headed for the helm. She raised the anchor, set their course, and unfurled the sails. The Leopard sliced through the water picking up speed as Court trimmed the sails to take advantage of the wind ruffling the water.

To her surprise, the pod of dolphins was following them. *Sage will love this*, she thought as she watched the dolphins scoop up the small fish churned to the surface in the catamaran’s wake.

Court entered the galley and motioned for Sage to follow her. “You must see this.”

“Oh,” Sage sighed as she watched the dolphins. “Will they follow us everywhere?”

“I don’t know. It is not uncommon for dolphins to follow boats to catch small fish pushed to the surface by the vessel, but I don’t think they follow far.”

Sage caught Court’s hand. “Let’s eat our breakfast so you can read to me. I am anxious to learn of Elgin’s fate.”

##

“Shall we sit where we were yesterday?” Court asked picking up the diary.

“Yes, that was perfect. We can see all around us but are not battered by the wind.”

Court stretched out on the bench cushions and Sage sat between her legs, leaning back against her wife so she could see the pages of the diary. “He drew pictures,” she noted.

“Yes, Elgin was a wonderful artist.” Court opened the book and began to read.

“June 21, 1655. We left the lookout and a half dozen swabbies on board and the rest of us swam to the island. It is a small island. We walked completely around it and then across it. It is green and has trees but there is no sign of life on it. I have claimed it and will make it my base of operations.

“June 22, 1655. I spent the entire day exploring Dawson Island. That is what I have named my island. While the crew sleeps tonight, Munster and I will take as much gold as we can carry onto the land and bury it.

“We have an excellent collection of sailing charts and I have studied all of them but can find no mention of an island in this area of the ocean. Either we are terribly confused about our location, or the island has appeared from nowhere.”

June 22, 1655, after midnight. Munster and I buried fifty pounds of gold tonight. The island is eerily silent beneath the full moon. We could see clear as day and had no trouble locating the spot we had marked for the hiding of our booty. We climbed to the highest spot on the island where seven huge boulders, standing six feet tall, formed a circle. We dug beneath the base of the smallest rock and concealed the gold wrapped in cow hides. It will require five more trips to bury all the gold we stole. Then I will set sail to find my Lisa and perhaps refill our coffers along the way.”

“Oh, he’s going to look for his lost love.” Sage sighed dreamily.

“I love that you are such a romantic,” Court said.

“Read!” Sage smiled.

“I need something to drink. My throat is dry.”

“I will get it. What do you want?”

“Water,” Court replied. “I’m going to check to see if your entourage is still with us.”

The tireless dolphins were still swimming beside the sailboat. “Incredible,” Court muttered as she returned to her spot on the bench.

Sage took her place between Court’s legs, opened the bottle of water, and handed it to her. “Read, please.” She smiled seductively.

“It appears the next entry is almost a month later,” Court informed her.

“Let me see. Are there any pictures?”

“Yes,” Court replied beginning to read.

July 15, 1655. I have learned that the Earl of Haywood sent a ship load of slaves to New Spain, and it is returning with sugar, silk, molasses, and enough gold to support a kingdom. I plan to rob it. I plan to rob every ship he owns until he is a pauper. I have changed. I am more muscular and very handsome. I am no longer the young ruffian the Earl whipped like a mad dog. Unlike my men, I am clean shaven, bathed, and well mannered. I have a textile designer making clothes for me from the fine silk we stole from the Earl’s latest shipment. I have been fortunate to acquire a home in the borough of London known as Westminster. I have plans for the Earl of Haywood right after I marry his daughter.”

“He is seeking revenge,” Court uttered. “That never turns out well.”

“Read,” Sage whispered.

August 26, 1655. I have settled into my new home and have been accepted by the genteel folks of Westminster. I

am considered an eligible bachelor thus single women seek my favor and I'm invited to many parties. Munster keeps our ship sailing and looting Haywood's. I make excuses about taking care of business when we sail to the island to bury our gold. I've learned that my pirate persona has been deemed Gold Rob. Hardly a name to strike fear into the hearts of my victims. I've earned the moniker because we never hurt the crewmen of the ships and I'm a robber. We also scatter enough gold coins around the deck for them to live a month.

“August 28, 1655. I continue to accept invitations to parties in hopes of seeing Lisa but to no avail. I have made discreet inquiries about her but am only told that she is in ill health. How could my beautiful, vivacious darling be in ill health? Tonight, I am attending another tedious party in hopes of seeing Lisa.

“August 28, 1655, after midnight. I danced with several twittering, empty-headed women tonight. I had called for my carriage when I noticed a slender young woman across the room. Her blonde hair sparkled in the candlelight. I couldn't see her face as she kept a fan in front of it. Could it be? Did I dare hope it might be . . .

“I crossed the room and stood before her. “May I have this dance?” I asked. She shook her head, no.”

“I wrapped my hand around hers and slowly pulled the fan down exposing the face that had haunted my dreams and every waking hour for the past eight months. ‘Lisa.’”

“I gently touched the scar that now marred her gorgeous features. ‘Els?’” She searched my face gazing into my eyes. ‘Is it you?’”

“I nodded, afraid to speak lest my voice give away my joyous heart. I closed the fan and slipped it into my pocket then pulled her into my arms where she belonged, and she relaxed against me. I placed my lips to her ear. ‘I've missed you so much.’ I whispered as I gracefully moved her around the dance floor.”

“He found her,” Sage whispered. “Just like I’d find you if we were ever separated.”

Court laughed. “After the wretched time I had alone in France, I will never be separated from you again. The nights are endless, and the days are miserable without you.”

“Um, that’s just because you like to um . . .”

“Like to what,” Court placed the diary on the deck and wrapped her arms around her wife.

“To make love to me,” Sage murmured rolling over in Court’s arms to face her.

“I do love to love you,” Court admitted.

“Then why are we just talking about it?” Sage pressed her full soft lips against Courts. “I love you,” she muttered sending a tingling vibration through the blonde.

“Can we talk about last night?” Court asked softly.

“If we must.”

“What happened?”

“I lost control,” Sage admitted. “I lost control and wanted to ravish you. Loving you sometimes makes me crazy. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m not complaining. I enjoyed it. It just surprised me.”

“You’re not angry with me?”

“Do I seem angry with you?”

“No. Thank heaven,” Sage sighed. “I’d be heartbroken if you were angry with me.”

“My secret pleasure is to make you lose control,” Court confessed. “Just don’t eat me. I mean for real don’t make a meal of me.”

Both laughed euphorically as they rolled around the deck in each other’s arms.

Chapter 15 – Courting Lisa

“Do we dare continue sailing in the dark?” Sage asked as the sun’s rays lessened.

“No, it’s too dangerous,” Court answered. “And I think your new friends want to play with you.”

Sage lowered the diving platform and sat down to dangle her feet among the dolphins who chattered joyously.

“I should name you,” she chatted to the mammals. “But I can’t tell you apart yet. Give me time I will.”

The dolphins began showing off for her, jumping in the air and floating on their backs. They thought it was great fun to slap the water with their tails and shower Sage with the ocean.

Sage and Court dove into the water and swam with the gentle creatures for over an hour. “They are astounding,” Court commented as they raised the diving deck. “So docile and protective.”

Sage yawned. “That wore me out. There is nothing like a good swim to relax and tire one.”

“We need to shower and wash the ocean water from our hair.” Court said. “Come on, I’ll soap you down or up or all over.”

“I like all over.” Sage laughed.

“How would you feel about sandwiches and chips for dinner?” Court asked.

“Yes, then we can get in bed so you can read to me.”

“I can do that.” Court agreed.

They carried their dinner onto the deck and watched a cruise ship pass in the distance. “Is it fun to go on a cruise?” Sage asked.

“Not even close to the fun of being on our own boat in private with you.”

“I like being alone with you too,” Sage admitted. “I know this is bad, but I don’t like sharing you with others.”

“You never share me with anyone, honey. You are always foremost on my mind.

“We go to bed, and you read now.”

Court followed her down the stairs from the helm and into their bedroom. They snuggled into bed and she began reading.

“October 30, 1655. I have called on Lisa many times since the dance. She loves me as I love her. She thought her father had beaten me to death and was horrified about his cruelty. ‘I meant nothing to him,’ she said, ‘or he would not have done this to me.’ She let her fingers trace the scar on her cheek. ‘He has no idea who you really are. He can’t believe anyone would want me now.’ I will do my best to pen our conversation as it changed my life.

She begged me to take her with me, but I assured her it was too dangerous on the ocean.

She argued that she had lost me once and never wanted to be apart from me. She scoffed at the dangers of the sea compared to the loneliness of living without me.

I declared I would ask her father for her hand, and she laughed hysterically assuring me that her father would be happy to get rid of her.

I told her there was much about me she didn’t know; like how I make my living which prompted the following conversation.

“I don’t care,” she declared. “I hope you are Gold Rob. I rather fancy him,” she teased me.

‘If I were him, would you sail away with me?’

‘In a heartbeat.’

‘What if you had to choose between us?’

‘Silly Els,” she giggled. ‘I’d always choose you.’

‘We should marry first. I want us to be right before God.’”

“Els is much like you,” Sage said as she snuggled deeper into Court’s side. “You always do the right thing.”

“Are you getting sleepy?”

“A little, but could you read more?”

“Of course.”

“**November 5, 1655.** I have spoken to Earl Haywood requesting Lisa’s hand in marriage. He readily agreed eager to get her off his hands. Our conversation was a bit strange. ‘I suppose you expect a large dowery considering her condition,’ he grumbled.

‘Her condition?’ I pretended not to understand his meaning. ‘Is she with child?’

‘No! No. I mean her face. Surely, you’ve noticed it is scarred.’

‘I love her, she is truly beautiful to me. That is all that matters.’

I did not want a dowery. I only wanted Lisa, but I did want to make Haywood squirm. I asked what he thought a fair dowery might be. He offered the measly amount of £.300 a figure at which I sneered. He explained his fortunes had waned due to the constant thefts by Gold Rob.

‘I have a surprise for him next time he attacks my ships,’ Haywood bragged. ‘There will be no gold only soldiers with guns. The Prince is a close friend of mine and is making the royal navy available to me. While Rob is being slaughtered by the navy, my second ship will be taking the longer but safer route to the new world.’

‘You are lucky to have friends in high places’ I stroked his ego. ‘£.300 is sufficient. We wish to marry December 20.’

He admitted he couldn’t afford a big wedding suggesting a small, intimate one instead.

I told him I would pay for the wedding and make all the arrangements. That was most agreeable to him.”

Sage sighed and slid down to lie flat on the bed. “I sleep now,” she whispered.

Court closed the diary and placed it on the small shelf by their bed. She was beginning to believe that Harrison was right, his island was the keeper of untold treasure.

She slipped from their bed and walked onto the deck of the Gran Felino. The boat gently rocked as the waves lapped against it. Harrison’s estimates about the surfacing of the island were incorrect if it was visible in 1655. It was rising from the ocean more frequently than Harrison thought or the nautical maps were incorrect. *This should be interesting*, she thought as she walked back to join her wife.

Chapter 16 – Documenting Beginnings

Sunday, Day 3

Sage awoke to the smell of coffee brewing and bacon frying. She smiled as she visualized her gorgeous blonde wife standing at the stove cooking their breakfast. She shuddered as she thought about how much she loved Court. She saw Elgin’s diary on the shelf and sat up to get it. The handwriting was flowy and difficult to follow—nothing like the books Court had given her to read.

She carried the diary into the galley and stopped to admire her wife standing in a bikini and barefoot. A wave of desire swept over her and all she could think about was wrapping her arms around the blonde.

“Good morning sleeping beauty,” Court turned to embrace her as Sage walked closer. “I have set us sailing so we’re on our way. I let you sleep late, but we have a lot to do today. I’ve been so wrapped up in making love to you and reading Elgin’s diary that I have neglected my work.”

Sage slipped her hands down the back of Court’s bikini bottoms. “I have another idea,” she purred cupping her wife’s cheeks in her hands and gently squeezing. “A much better idea.”

“Baby, I really have a lot to do today. We will reach the island tomorrow and I haven’t shot an inch of film for the documentary.”

“I love how smooth and firm your cheeks feel in the palm of my hands.”

“Breakfast will get cold.” Court whimpered.

“I won’t take long. I promise.” Sage smiled as she slipped her hands from the bikini bottoms to unfasten the top and let it fall to the floor.

Court turned to face her, and Sage backed her against the island, kissing her fervently. Sage easily lifted her wife

onto the counter without breaking their kiss. “I love you,” she whispered into Court’s ear and nipping her neck. “So much.” She continued kissing Court as she caressed her breast with one hand and slipped the other into the blonde’s bikini bottom.

“Dear God, you are driving me crazy,” Court cried. “I’ve become a fan of cold breakfasts. Take as long as you like.”

True to her word, Sage brought her quickly, glorying in the look on Court’s face when she threw her head back and screamed, “Sage!” Courts fingers dug into her back as she strained to get more of Sage. She wrapped her legs around her wife’s waist pulling Sage into her. “More,” she demanded. Sage moved her hand faster, adding a finger responding to her wife’s demands. Court’s nails cut into her back as she braced against Sage and screamed her final declaration of complete satisfaction. She slumped forward resting her head on Sage’s shoulder. “Where did you learn that?”

“From you, silly. Why don’t you go wash and get dressed while I finish getting breakfast on the table and we can discuss what needs to happen today?” Sage suggested.

“The most important thing that needed to happen today, just did,” Court husked.

A smile of satisfaction spread across the redhead’s face as she clenched herself and replied, “You can thank me later.”

Court ran the tip of her tongue between her lips trying to put some moisture back into them. “Oh, I plan to.” She scurried from the galley, overcoming the desire to drag her wife into the bedroom.

##

Court returned wearing shorts and a top that tied above her waist exposing her tanned, flat stomach. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“And here you are asking for it again,” Sage licked her lips.

“Stay away from me,” Court feigned fear. “I must work today, baby.”

Sage grinned and placed their breakfast on the table and filled their coffee cups. “Tell me what we need to do today?” she asked sliding into the booth.

“I want to get several shots of Gran Felino from all angles. I must have some footage of the dolphins and you swimming with them. I’ve been thinking, you are one gorgeous woman, and you would enhance anyone’s documentary. I’d like to feature you as the spokesperson in the docu instead of me. You can be the face of Southerland Documentaries and I’ll be the beauty behind the camera.”

“I love your humility,” Sage teased.

Court laughed. “Seriously, how would you feel about that?”

“Whatever makes you happy is good for me. I have always trusted your judgement.”

Chapter 17 – The Money Shot

“I going to start writing the script for the boat voyage while you set up the cameras four-square like we always do.” Court directed Sage.

“All finished,” Sage reported. “The sun is moving toward our back, so we won’t be shooting into it.”

“See what you think of this,” Court pulled the sheet from the printer.

Sage read it smiling broadly as she finished. “You are truly a genius with words. “I love this. Everyone will think I’m so brilliant.”

Court laughed. “We will start off together. I’ll welcome our viewers than turn it over to you. You need to memorize your part then we will begin filming.”

“Done,” Sage chirped. “All memorized.”

“Seriously, that quickly?”

Sage nodded. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Put on this lapel mike and let’s do it.”

Using a remote control, Court started the camera they were facing and began talking. “Welcome, I’m Courtney Southerland and this is my lovely wife, Sage. We are on a catamaran Leopard P50 somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle or as alarmists like to call it The Devil’s Triangle. Sage is going to take you on a tour of our boat, and I’ll be behind the camera. Enjoy!”

Sage walked to the back of the boat. “The first thing I want to show you is a pod of dolphins that have adopted us. They joined us off the coast of Nassau and have been our constant companions.”

She lowered the diving platform and dangled her feet into the water. The dolphins began chirping and chittering as they swam around her legs. Court moved in for a closeup of Sage stroking the mammal’s beaks and talking to them.

“We swim with them every evening,” Sage explained as the dolphins became more vocal because she was walking away from them. “We will have more footage of them later.”

“The Leopard P50 was custom built for this documentary as we will be investigating an island that has no utilities at all. The boat is totally self-sufficient. Solar energy provides all the electricity we use on the boat and a water maker from Sea Water Pro converts sea water to fresh water, so it is drinkable. The system boils sea water then condenses it or chemically removes the salt creating fresh drinkable water.”

Sage climbed up to the top deck. *I will shoot this from a different angle*, Court thought as she drooled over her wife’s long legs and perfect backside going up the ladder. She tuned of her camera and joined Sage on the top deck where she filmed panoramic views of the boat deck, ocean, seagulls, and dolphins.

“I want you to do a voice over on this footage,” she told Sage. A cruise ship passed in the distance and Court filmed it until it disappeared.

“We should go inside and return when the sun isn’t so hot.” Sage suggested. “And we need to cover ourselves in sunblock.”

“Good idea,” Court bent over and kissed her. “I’d like a nice tall glass of ice-cold lemonade.”

“That does sound good.”

“The sun really does drain one’s energy,” Sage noted. “It is much hotter here than in the canyon. I could run for miles in the sun there.”

“We are much closer to the Equator, so it is much hotter here.”

“The Equa—what!” Sage scrunched up her nose. “I don’t know Equator.”

“Come, I’ll show you.” Court led her to the computer turned it on and pushed a button. The seventy-two-inch monitor hanging on the wall across from their desk lit up.

“Starlink provides us with internet service,” Court explained. “We can pull up a shot of the equator and you can see how close we are to it compared to Texas. The earth’s atmosphere is thickest and deepest at the equator generating a lot of heat. Thick, deep air is more difficult to breathe which will drain your energy. You will probably have less stamina on Harrison’s Island.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Sage said as she contemplated the information.

Court checked their GPS coordinate then filled the screen with a map of the earth and zeroing in on the land masses bordering the Atlantic Ocean. “Here is the equator. It is eight thousand miles from Texas but only a little und a thousand eight hundred miles from Nassau. That is quite a difference in atmosphere.”

“Hopefully we will adapt,” Sage said.

“We are right on course for the island. I think we are safe to leave the boat on automatic and take a nap,” Court suggested. “I’m exhausted. We will resume filming late in the afternoon.”

“What will we shoot this afternoon?”

“While the light is good, we will film inside the catamaran then move outside and get footage of you swimming with the dolphins.”

“I like swimming with the dolphins,” Sage admitted. “They are gentle and loving like Kinga. I miss Kinga.”

Court held out a glass of lemonade to her wife. “I know you do, hon. Would you like me to read from Elgin’s diary while we rehydrate?”

“I would love that so much.”

“Let’s sit on the bed so you can fall over and go to sleep,” Court teased her.

Sage crawled onto the bed and lay on her back. “Read,” she commanded.

“December 1, 1655. We will marry in just twenty more days. I pinch myself to make certain I’m not dreaming. I must find a way to tell Lisa that I am Gold Rob. I pray she will still love me.”

The diary slipped from Court’s hand as both women slipped into a deep sleep.

Chapter 18 – The Storm

Court awoke to the sound of the anchor raising. “Someone is on our boat,” she whispered.

Violent shaking and spinning, slung Court against the bedroom wall. She grabbed blindly for something to hang onto. It was dark. Where was Sage? Had they hit something? Were they sinking?

“Sage!” she screamed feeling around the bed for her wife. “Sage!”

Strong hands grasped her as Sage clasped her fingers around Court’s wrist. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. It’s stopped for the moment. Put on a vest while I get a flashlight.”

“Don’t let go of my hand,” Sage begged. “Please.”

“I’ve got you, baby. Hang onto my blouse. I need my hands free to pull out our vests and lights.”

Court pushed the flotation device into Sage’s hands. “Put this on.” She waited patiently until she was certain her wife was secured in the life vest, then donned her own. She turned on a flashlight and handed Sage one. They flashed their beams around the room.

“At least no water is gushing in.” Court counted their blessings as she hooked a line from her life jacket to Sage’s. “So we won’t get separated,” she explained.

They could hear the wind howling and waves washing over the deck of the boat. “I must get to the helm. I don’t know what is going on,” Court cried. “It sounds like a monsoon.”

The boat began to spin again as if were caught up in a whirling tornado funnel. Court slammed against the side of the galley and Sage landed hard against her. Wood splintered and metal scrapped across the deck.

Sage clung to Court. “Please, don’t go out there.”

“I must,” Court screamed above the noise. “I must know what we are dealing with.”

Sage clung to her arm as Court dragged them across the galley to the deck door. “Hang on tight, water may come flooding in when I open the door.” She warned Sage.

Both took a deep breath as Court unlocked the door and pulled it open. “What the hell?”

The silence shocked them. The sun was shining on deck and the waves were calm. There was no storm or catastrophe. No scattered wood or ripped metal. There was nothing.

“Court,” Sage whispered. “What is this?”

Court slowly advanced up the steps and looked around then pulled Sage up beside her. “This is the craziest thing I’ve ever encountered.” She looked to see if her cameras were still intact. They were.

“Let’s pull the cards from the cameras and see if they captured anything, but don’t disconnect from me.”

Together they walked to each camera and popped out its SD card. Undisturbed, the dolphins were cavorting in the water beside the boat making their usual happy chirping sounds.

“What time is it?” Sage asked.

“I don’t know my watch has stopped. It looks like noon. The sun is directly above us.”

“But it was behind us when we laid down for a nap,” Sage reminded her.

“I know. Let’s check our navigational systems and see what they show.”

“Are we safe to remove these vests?” Sage asked. “They are very hot.”

Court looked around at the glasslike surface of the ocean and felt the lack of a sea breeze. It was uncommonly still. “No, let’s keep them on. Something isn’t right.”

They climbed the steps to the helm and Court scrutinized the GPS. “We are still on course,” she

announced, “but Sage, it’s tomorrow and we are only a few hours from the island.” Goosebumps popped out on her arms as she made her announcement.

“How is that possible?” Sage gulped looking around them.

“I don’t know, but whatever transported us here also transported the dolphins.”

“They are as happy as ever,” Sage observed watching them frolic beside the boat.

Court pulled a pair of high-powered binoculars from the compartment of the helm and surveyed the horizon all around them. She saw nothing that resembled an land.

“It’s as if something picked us up yesterday and sat us down in today.” Sage puzzled. “I won’t lie, Court, I’m a little frightened.”

“Maybe the GPS is out of whack,” Court replied.

Sage giggled. “I’ve never heard you use that phrase before,” She said. “I’m assuming it means it isn’t working properly.”

Court laughed out loud. “Look at you, teaching me proper English. Yes, that is a colloquial phrase meaning out of order.”

Court took manual control of the craft, increased the speed, and noted the gas tank was still three fourths full.

“Should we raise the sails?” Sage asked.

“No, I want to be the only one in control of this vessel. I don’t want any strange gales or rising tides to carry it somewhere I don’t want to be.”

Sage sat closely beside her wife. It was reassuring to know that Court had a plan and was preparing for any unexpected events.

Court opened the compartment that had held the binoculars and pulled out a pair of two-way radios. She paired them together then showed the screen to Sage. This is a combination compass, GPS, and communicator. Only you

and I can communicate with one another and the boat on these devices. They record everywhere we go and everything we say and send it back to the boat's computer. A monster hard drive onboard stores the information. Always keep it with you."

The dolphins began to raise a ruckus thrashing about, squealing, and bumping the boat. Sage scrutinized the horizon.

"There," she shouted excitedly. "I see land."

Court grabbed the binoculars and looked in the direction indicated by her wife. On the horizon, she could see a speck. "How can you see that?"

"I inherited all my mother's abilities," Sage responded.

"Kinga," Court muttered

"We will be there in three hours," Sage informed her.

Court smiled and thought, *I don't need all these gadgets. I have her.*

Chapter 19 – Harrison’s Island

The catamaran’s twin-hull design allowed it to float in shallow water getting within a quarter mile of the shore. They dropped anchor and stood at the rail watching the island for any sign of life.

“It is deserted,” Sage declared sniffing the breeze. “Should we go ashore?”

“No. I want to review the GPS printouts and see where our boat has been for the last twenty-four hours. She looked at her digital watch and was surprised see it was working properly.

“I’ll pop a couple of our pre-prepared meals into the microwave,” Sage said. “You stay here and keep watch.”

“I don’t want you out of my sight,” Court said. “I have an uneasy feeling about all of this.”

“Then we can look at the SD cards while dinner cooks,” Sage suggested. “But I’ve got to get out of this life jacket. It is smothering me.”

They entered the galley and Court raised all the window shades giving them a panoramic view of their surroundings. Court locked the cabin door and unzipped her life vest as Sage did the same.

Sage pulled two bottles of cold water from the fridge and handed one to her wife. They drained their bottles and she retrieved two more. “I was parched,” she said sipping the second bottle of water more slowly.

Court popped an SD drive into the computer and started watching it at noon the day before. As the pictures streamed across the screen, Sage opened the microwave dinners and placed them on their desks. She poured lemonade and sat beside Court.

“Nothing,” Court said. “Just continuous shots of our boat deck.” She began eating her meal.

“What is that?” Sage asked as a small black spot materialized on the horizon. They watched in silence while the spot grew larger as it moved closer to the cameras.

“A cloud,” Court whispered. “It’s a cloud.”

The dark cloud advanced onto the deck of the Gran Felino and stopped. It seemed to pulsate like the beating of a heart. With every beat it grew larger and darker until it engulfed the ship. The cameras showed nothing but darkness as black as a moonless night. Suddenly the cloud evaporated as innocuously as it had appeared. Sunshine bounced off the metal boat fittings and sparkled in the ocean water.

The cameras recorded Court and Sage cautiously easing onto the deck, their faces filled with anguish. They recorded everything that happened until the women pulled the SD cards from them.

“We should put new cards in the cameras before nightfall,” Court said.

“Yes,” Sage hissed. Let’s do it now.”

They didn’t talk as they put new SD cards into the camera slots. Both kept a wary eye on the island.

“Would you mind if we moved the boat deeper into the ocean?” Sage asked. “I don’t want to be this close to the island while we are sleeping.”

“I think that would be the smart thing to do,” Court agreed. She climbed to the helm, pulled her binoculars from the compartment, and inspected the island again. “Nothing. It is completely deserted.”

Court moved the boat five miles from land trying to clear the island’s continental shelf before dropping anchor. Her sonar depth finder gave her a reading of twenty-five feet. “This should be safe,” she told Sage. “I’m almost afraid to sleep, scared that cloud or whatever it was will return.”

“We can take turns keeping watch,” Sage suggested. “I could sit in the helm and see anything approaching.”

“I’d feel safer if we stay with each other. Let’s get into bed and I’ll read to you. That will calm our nerves.”

They showered and slipped into bed naked. Court opened the diary and began to read as Sage wrapped around her resting her head on the blonde’s shoulder.

“December 5, 1655. I told my love that I must make a business trip. Munster has been watching Haywood’s ships that have been rumored to carry fighters from the king’s navy. He has put out the rumor that he will kill Gold Rob. One ship has only been loaded with gold from the king’s coffers. I think the gold is to pay British troops being sent to America to gain control over the New England colonies who are becoming more independent and resistant to British rule. Rumor has it the troop build up will result in an attack to crush the dissidents and their leaders.

“December 6, 1655. Munster has reported that a ship was loaded with a platoon from the British navy and will set sail at midnight. A second ship is weighted down with gold and will sail an hour later. I have sent word to Lisa that I have left and will return in time for our wedding. Munster and I will join our men on our ship that is sailing to meet us. Soon the king’s gold will be ours, the troops will land on foreign soil with no funding, and Haywood will be bankrupt. Justice will be served.

Chapter 20

Monday, Day 4

Luxuriating in the soft warmth of the woman wrapped around her Sage snuggled deeper into Court's arms. "Um, you're awake," Court murmured.

"Mm-hmm."

They drew strength from one another as neither voiced the question they were thinking. Finally, Court said, "I wonder what day it is and where we are."

"We should check," Sage suggested begrudgingly. "Although I'd rather stay here in your arms."

"We should guarantee our safety first. I'll make coffee while you dress." She pulled on a Henley and jeans then padded barefoot to the galley.

Court started the Keurig then walked onto the deck. It was a perfect day—calm and sunny. The ocean waves rippled against the side of the boat. She climbed to the helm and looked around. Everything was perfectly normal. The dolphins were playing beside the boat and the island was in the distance.

The coffee maker gasped its last gurgle as Sage entered the galley. She poured the coffee into two cups and joined her wife on deck.

"Join me," Court urged reaching down for the coffee cups so Sage could climb the ladder to the helm.

Sage searched the scene before her for any sign of danger. "Everything seems normal," she declared. "The dolphins are cavorting; the ocean is calm, and it is cooler than I expected."

"It is Monday, the day we were scheduled to arrive here," Court noted. "Only we arrived yesterday."

They drank their coffee in silence. "Is it possible we fell asleep and made it here? We did put the boat on automatic

so we could continue our journey while we took a nap. Perhaps we slept through the night and into the next day.”

What about the cloud and the howling wind and all those other sounds? We didn’t dream them; they are on the videos.”

“True. Let’s collect the new SD cards and you can scan through them while I cook breakfast.”

“Good idea and I want to start keeping a captain’s log,” Court said.

##

“Not a sign of anything but us,” Court declared as she viewed the videos from the night before. Let’s pull the cat as close to shore as possible and anchor. We can take the life raft to the island. I want to set up cameras on the island and both of us need to wear a chest camera so we can record anything we encounter.”

“I’ve packed snacks for us,” Sage grinned. “A bag of Snickers and bottles of water.”

Court laughed. “I love you.”

They rowed the raft to the island. “I feel like I should plant a flag and claim it for the U.S.” Court said preparing to step out of the boat. “Oh, the water is warm.”

“Pleasantly warm,” Sage agreed grabbing the raft’s towline and pulling it out of the water.”

They spent the morning placing cameras half a mile apart to the other side of the island.

“I’d assumed the island was formed by volcanic action,” Court said as they rested beneath a large mango tree, “but it is almost entirely flat except for the mountain-like shape in the center. We should climb to the top of that.”

“According to the maps Harrison gave us the island is five miles around. We should be able to walk that before the sun goes down. Even strolling along, we will cover a mile in

twenty minutes so we should be able to circle the island in about two hours.”

Sage opened two Snicker bars and handed one to her wife. “It is so quiet it is disconcerting,” she noted.

“I wish I knew how long it has been above the water,” Court puzzled. “It must be at least fifty years.”

“Why would you say that?” Sage questioned. “Harrison said it had just materialized.”

“All the botany is fully developed. The trees are older, and all the vegetation is mature. From Elgin’s diary we already know the island doesn’t appear and disappear every hundred years.”

“I’m amazed by the variety of trees,” Court noted as they strolled on the beach surrounding the island. “Pineapple, mango, coconut, banana, papaya, sugar apple, every tropical fruit tree imaginable.”

“We should take some of the coconuts and other fruit to the boat with us,” Sage suggested. Without hesitating she shimmied up a coconut tree and tossed down two of the large round balls.

She climbed down the tree. “I’ve never eaten raw cocoanut,” she admitted. “I’m not certain I can get into the shell.”

“Leave them here at the trunk of this tree and we will pick them up on the way back to the ship.”

##

They walked halfway around the island and stopped to drink the bottled water and eat another Snicker bar.

“Using Elgin’s diary, we will try to locate some of his buried treasure tomorrow,” Court said. “We will wear our chest cameras so we can record our search and discovery of the gold.”

“It is strange that no birds, insects or lizards live on the island.” Sage pointed out. “Nothing alive inhabits this place.”

“I’ve seen no source of fresh water,” Court pointed out. “There are no rivers or streams. Not even a tiny lake or pond.”

“In the morning we will climb to the top to the small mountain in the center of the island. I’m certain it isn’t a volcano crater.” Court said. “I’m betting that is where we will find the huge rocks where Elgin hid his treasure. I honestly believe we can complete the documentary in a month.”

“Wow!” Sage exclaimed. “You spent four years producing the documentary for Palo Duro Canyon.”

Court kissed her. “That is because I was trying to gain the trust of the woman of my dreams.”

“I was wary of you at first,” Sage admitted. “I had been watching you for a long time. You mystified me.”

The earth shook beneath them. “What is that?” Sage cried.

“I don’t know, maybe an earthquake or an underwater volcanic eruption. I want to don our diving gear and go far below the island if possible.” Court said. “Right now, we should get back to the boat and try to contact Harrison and let him know we have visited the island.”

##

“I must admit Harrison stocked our freezer with the most delicious food,” Court noted. “That lobster tail was as fresh as if we’d just caught it.”

“Yes, and I love the way you prepared it.”

“Do you want to relax on deck, and I’ll read more of Elgin’s diary?” Court asked.

“I’d love that. You grab the diary, and I will make fresh lemonade.”

“December 8, 1655. We attacked Haywood’s ship right after midnight. My men held the captain and all the officers at gunpoint while we sailed close to land then threw them overboard with a couple of life rafts. As I shoved one sailor off the boat, he grabbed my mask and pulled it from my face. I should have killed him. He may be able to identify me but it happened so fast I’m praying he didn’t get a good look at me. We confiscated Haywood’s ship and will add it to our fleet of pirate ships. Ha! Our fleet of three.

“There is enough gold on the ship to support a kingdom. I will retire and turn the ships over to Munster. I have enough gold to last Lisa and me for eternity.”

“December 10, 1655. We have dropped anchor at the island. Everyone has named it Devil’s Island. They are afraid to set foot on it because of the accidents that have resulted in loss of lives. I’ve paid the men handsomely and they have taken Haywood’s ship to a place called Pirate’s Cove. Munster and I will unload the gold after dark and bury it. It will take us a week to transfer it. The entire cargo hold is filled with gold coins. Spanish doubloons and newly minted British Gold Sovereigns make up the bulk of the gold, but there are many gold coins from other countries—stolen, no doubt. I was shocked to find a large chest filled with newly minted English Broads issued by the Commonwealth of England. The Broads are worth 20 shillings and bear the image of Oliver Cromwell”

“December 15, 1655. Today, Earl Haywood presented me with a ransom demand for my darling Lisa. She was kidnapped during my absence. When I asked him what happened, he told me she had been abducted on her way home from Sunday mass. He was very evasive when I queried him about the reason Lisa was walking home alone from church. The authorities have been informed but have learned nothing of her disappearance. She has vanished.

“The ransom for Lisa is excessive. Although I appear to be well off, I have no idea why Haywood thinks I would have that kind of funds at my disposal. I’ll have to sail back to the island for that much gold.

“I informed Haywood that it would take me at least a full week to arrange for the amount demanded. He placed a letter requesting seven days to raise the ransom in the place designated by the kidnapper.

“**December 16, 1655.** A courier delivered a message to the Haywood residence while I was visiting. It said, “You have until midnight of December 23rd to get the ransom.” It was signed “Gold Rob.”

“I reread the letter frowning when I saw my own alias as the signature. I asked Haywood if he had any idea how I might find Gold Rob. He informed me the man was a pirate who had a secret island in the Devil’s Triangle.

“You don’t seem to be concerned that he has Lisa,” I noted.

“I’m washing my hands of my daughter. She has always caused me trouble.”

“You marred her beauty!” I was fighting to keep from slamming my fist into his face.

“Yes, because I caught her in the throes of passion with another woman. I horsewhipped the other woman. I heard she died from the beating.”

“And you have no remorse, whatsoever?” I cried.

“Why should I? She was a travesty, an unnatural creature.”

“I . . . I had no idea,” I mumbled. “If she prefers women, why did Lisa agree to marry me?”

“No one else would have her,” Haywood smirked. “The Buggery law calls for the death sentence when men are involved, but no such laws apply to women having sexual relations with other women. I should have whipped her to death too.”

Sage placed her hand over the diary to stop Court's reading, "What is buggery?" She asked.

Court bit her lower lip, trying to think of a way to explain buggery to her wife. *This can get tricky*, she thought.

"We haven't always been free to love whomever we wish. In the fifteen hundreds the Buggery Law called for the death penalty for men caught having anal sex with another man, woman, or animal. Historically, buggery or sodomy were words used to define a crime against nature, according to the law."

Sage tilted her head contemplating the information she had just received. "Haywood said Lisa was involved with another woman that was horsewhipped by him. That means Elgin is a woman masquerading as a man and she is the pirate, Gold Rob."

"Yes," Court said. "Apparently, Elgin recovered from the beating and lived life as a man so she could marry Lisa."

"This could get confusing," Sage muttered.

"Sage," Court breathed her name. "Laws like the Buggery Law were passed by men and governments and zealots for their own personal reasons. What goes on in one's private life is that person's business and no one else's if no one is harmed or forced to participate in anything against their will. We have free will."

"Why did the Buggery Law only apply to men and not women?" Sage inquired.

"Men made all the laws back then. I'm sure they couldn't fathom that a woman would choose another woman over a man, so they didn't bother with the idea. Just as the Bible only condemns relationships between two men. The Bible was written by men who couldn't imagine women preferring women.

"If they understood women at all, I doubt the Book of Ruth would have been included in the Bible as it is obvious that Ruth and Naomi were in a committed relationship. Older

wedding vows often included parts of Ruth’s pledge to Naomi.”

“What was Ruth’s pledge?” Sage questioned.

“Give me a minute.” Court pulled up the Book of Ruth on her laptop. “Ah, here it is.”

Court began reading from the Book of Ruth,

“For wherever you go, I will go,
and wherever you live, I will live.
Your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.
Where you die, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
May the LORD punish me,
and ever so severely,
if anything, but death
separates you and me.”

“Marriage vows throughout the ages have used bits and pieces of Ruth’s vow to Naomi.”

“It is beautiful,” Sage said softly. “It is my vow to you.”

“It is also my commitment to you,” Court reaffirmed her feelings for her red-haired wife.”

“If God Rob doesn’t have Lisa, who has kidnapped her?” Sage directed Court’s attention back to the diary.

“Who do you think?”

“I think Haywood has her and is trying to get Elgin to pay the ransom because he is in desperate need of money.

Chapter 21

Tuesday, Day 5

With Elgin's maps sealed in a watertight bag, they climbed into the raft and rowed to shore. Once again, they were astounded by the total silence of the island. They ran barefoot through the fine white sand of the beach and made bird calls hoping for an answer.

Court shouldered her backpack and Sage did the same. "Straight from here to the top of that mountain," she said.

"I thought we'd be able to see the huge stones from here" Sage mentioned.

"I haven't seen anything that looks like large boulders." Court huffed as the incline became steeper.

"Don't let me forget to place cameras on our way down and I want to position several on top of the mountain."

Sage giggled, "I'd hardly call this a mountain."

Two hours later, they were only halfway to the top. "This is very misleading," Court noted. "I would have bet money we would reach the top in an hour and we're only halfway up."

"I am beginning to believe this island is an optical illusion." Sage laughed. "Let's take a break and have lunch and a bottle of water."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Court agreed.

They sat in the grass and gazed back at the ocean. "It is an optical something," Court muttered. "The ship looks miles away and, I don't know—everything is out of proportion when viewed from here."

Sage yanked her head and squinted her eyes. "Do you hear that?"

Court listened. "I don't hear a thing."

"It's a high-pitched whine. Like those electrical gadgets you have on the deck to keep mosquitos away. Remember

how we had to adjust them way down low to keep from driving Kinga, Jake, and me crazy? It is piercing. I'm certain you can't hear it."

"When did you begin hearing it?"

"A few seconds ago." Sage walked higher up the incline. "The higher I go, the worse it gets. Court, I may not be able to make it to the top of the mountain."

"Let's turn back. We'll get some earplugs for you. I don't feel safe separated from you. We need to stick together."

Sage nodded and they began their decent. "It is going away," she said. "Something is on top of this mound that is meant to drive away—"

"Drive away what?" Court asked.

"Animals," Sage whispered. "That is why nothing lives on this island."

"Whatever it is it is manmade," Court exclaimed.

"Let's read the diary and see if Elgin writes anything about what we have encountered," Sage suggested as they walked to the water's edge.

They looked around the beach. "I keep expecting to see footprints in the sand," Court said a frown wrinkling her brow.

An uncontrollable shudder traversed Sage's body. "This place gives me the winkies," Sage declared.

"Winkies?" Court chuckled. "What are winkies?"

"You know! You told me it meant an eerie feeling."

"Willies." Court smiled. "I love you. You make me so happy."

Sage scowled. "Am I your court jester?"

"You are my everything," Court declared. "Just being with you makes everything in my life a thousand times better."

Sage caught her hand as they waded to the raft. "That is how I feel about you too."

They ate dinner then relaxed on the upper deck. “The breeze feels good,” Sage said. “This is truly an idyllic place.”

“It is okay, but I still prefer our canyon.”

“As do I,” Sage murmured. She took her place between Court’s legs and leaned back against her chest as her wife held the diary where both could see it.

Court opened the book and began to read.

“December 20, 1655. This was to be my wedding day, instead I am lying in wait for Haywood’s ship carrying Cromwell’s gold. We have decided to put Haywood’s sailors adrift in lifeboats and confiscate his ship. Tomorrow it will fly my colors—gold and black, the colors of Gold Rob.

“I shall keep my composure as I give Haywood the ransom payment from his own ship’s cargo hold. As soon as I have my love, we will run away and get married in the new world. I will make her the queen of my island. We can live there with no interference from the outside world—our own paradise.”

“December 24, 1655. It is Christmas Eve. Christmas has been banned by Oliver Cromwell, and his dreary band of Puritans have managed to kill Christmas. In June, 1647 parliament passed an ordinance declaring the celebration of Christmas illegal and a punishable offence. It is a dark time in the British empire. A time to flee to the new world where intelligent men with open minds are prevailing.

“I have sent word to Haywood that I have borrowed the gold needed to secure the return of my beloved Lisa. He wants me to give the treasure to him and he will arrange for her release. I don’t trust him. I have asked him to have the kidnapper meet me in the center of Old London Bridge with Lisa where I will gladly exchange the gold for my betrothed. I am anxiously awaiting his answer.”

Court closed the diary. “We should attempt to contact Harrison and inform him of our findings,” she said.

“What findings?” Sage huffed eager to continue reading the diary. “No life on the island and a whining sound that only an animal can hear. How would we explain that I hear it?”

“Good point,” Court agreed. “Still, I’ll feel better when we have contacted him and Huntley. I want to be certain our communication system works properly. So far, we’ve gotten nothing but static.”

Sage followed her wife to the galley and draped around Court’s shoulders as the blonde tried to raise a response from Harrison using the HF-SSB transceivers.

“Hello,” Harrison’s voice was clear. “I’m so glad you called. I was beginning to worry about you.”

“We are fine,” Court replied. “We are anchored in a cove in shallow water. We can see the island clearly from here.”

“What does it look like?” Harrison’s enthusiasm was obvious.

“Paradise,” Court said. “A very silent paradise.”

“What do you mean?”

“The island is about five miles in circumference,” Court explained. “We’ve explored most of it except for a small mountain right in the center of it. We plan to go to the top tomorrow. I suspect that is where the large rocks are, and the gold is hidden.”

“Good! Good!” Harrison exclaimed. “Please contact me as soon as you discover the gold. Is everything functioning, okay? The catamaran working as it should.”

“The catamaran is awesome,” Court replied. “We’ve fallen in love with it. Harrison, have you read Elgin’s diaries?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know the island isn’t truly on a hundred-year schedule?”

“Yes,” Harrison answered softly. “I did notice some anomalies in her diaries.”

“And you know that Elgin and Lisa were female lovers?”

“Yes. Does that bother you?”

“Of course not,” Court retorted. “We’re climbing to the top of the mountain tomorrow. I’ll let you know what we find.”

“I can’t wait to hear from you,” Harrison replied. “You should call Huntley. She is anxious about you.”

“We will call her as soon as we hang up from you.”

“I’ll bid you adieu,” Harrison said jovially,

Court disconnected the transmission and contacted Huntley.

“It is about time you called,” the agent exclaimed. “I’ve been worried sick about the two of you.”

“We are fine,” Court assured her. “We’ve done a quick walk around the island and tomorrow we plan to climb to the top of a small mountain in the center of the island. We think that is where the gold is buried since we can’t locate any large rocks anywhere else.”

“I’m happy to hear your voice and know you are safe. Is Sage nearby?”

“Hello, Huntley,” Sage answered. “It is beautiful here, but we do miss our home and Jake. When we finish talking to you, we are going to call Debbie and check on Jake.” It hurt Sage’s heart that others couldn’t know about Kinga, but she knew knowledge of her existence would endanger the black panther.

“Call me and let me know as soon as you find something,” Huntly requested.

“You know we will,” Court replied, “but no matter what, do not release anything to the public. I want no leaks prior to the release of our documentary. There is something wrong about this island and I won’t be forced to back pedal.

When we release our information, I want it to be completely correct and verifiable. Mute is the word until Sage, and I finish our project.”

“I’ve been your agent long enough to know the drill,” Huntley reminded her.

They called Debbie and had her put them on the speaker so Jake could hear their voices. The black Belgian Malinois yelped gleefully back at them. “We will be home in a month for a brief visit,” Court promised. She disconnected the call and glanced at her watch.

“It’s past midnight,” she exclaimed. “We should get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.

Still draped around her wife’s shoulders, Sage kissed the nape of her neck. “Sage has a request.” The redhead giggled.

“Um, and what might that be?”

“Sage wants to know if Elgin saves Lisa.”

Court laughed. “Of course, you do.”

The settled into their usual reading position and Court began to read.

December 25, 1655.

Haywood responded to my message informing me that the kidnapers will only deal with him. I agreed to deliver the gold at 11:00 a.m. Christmas Day.

Munster and I took turns watching Haywood’s every movement. This morning just before dawn Haywood walked from his home to his business establishment about a mile away. We followed and watched as he unlocked a shed where he had imprisoned my Lisa.

“It is a shame, I’ll have to kill you, daughter,” he smirked. “Otherwise, you will out me to your fiancé.”

Lisa squealed through the gag in her mouth and shook her head no.

“In a few hours, I will have a king’s ransom in my possession and Elgin will find your body washed up against

the center arch of Old London Bridge. Don't worry dear, your pathetic life will soon be over." He didn't offer her food or drink. Instead, he closed the shack door and placed the bar through the lock."

Sage's body was relaxed against her wife and Court thought she was asleep, so she closed the diary.

"Court read more," Sage mumbled.

Court kissed the top of her head and placed the diary on the nightstand. "Go to sleep, honey. We will read more tomorrow."

Sage nodded and slid from Court's lap onto the bed. "Goodnight, my love," she whispered.

Chapter 22

Wednesday, Day 6

At the first light of day, Court eased out of bed and pulled on her jeans and Henley. Soft fingers curled around her wrist. “Don’t go,” Sage murmured.

“I’ll be right back,” Court promised. “I just want to check out everything.”

Sage’s eyes closed and she smiled sweetly.

Court collected the SD cards from the cameras on the deck and replaced them with new ones. The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted up to her.

“Good morning, lovely lady. I was trying to let you sleep.” Court said as she kissed Sage’s bare shoulder.

Just as they did every morning, Court viewed the video from the deck cameras while Sage cooked breakfast. With their coffee and food before them, both watched as the video whizzed by.

“Nothing to see here,” Sage noted carrying their plates to the sink. “I have my earplugs, hiking boots, and Go Camera in my water-tight case. Do we need to take the raft ashore? The water is crystal clear and shallow. We can swim then walk most of the way to the island.

“Good idea.” Court agreed. “I’ll get my things packed.”

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“Oh, this water is perfect.” Sage slid of the diving platform into the coolness.

Court followed her amazed at the perfect temperature of the water. “It is perfect,” she repeated.

The dolphins circled them chattering excitedly as the women touched them and stroked their stomachs. They splashed and played in the water like teenagers but sobered as they walked onto the beach and encountered the total

silence of the island. The dolphins kept their distance staying in deeper water.

“This place is unnerving,” Court mumbled sitting down to pull on her hiking boots.

“Even though there was a quietness about the canyon, one could still hear the signs of life there.” Sage noted.

“Maybe it hasn’t been above water long enough for birds to find it,” Court theorized. “Do you hear the sound you heard yesterday?”

“No, but I don’t expect to hear it until we are farther up the mountain. I have my earplugs ready. I’m determined to reach the top today.”

They strapped on their Go Cameras and set off to find Elgin’s gold. Halfway up the mountain Sage held up her hand to Court to stop. “I’m beginning to faintly hear it. I’m not going to put in the earplugs yet. I want to find the source of the sound.”

As they climbed the mountain the sound reached a screeching whine that Sage couldn’t tolerate. “Put in your earplugs,” Court yelled. “Blood is running from your ear. It will burst your eardrum.”

Sage quickly placed the earplugs into her ears as her wife wiped away the blood with a tissue. Court caught Sage’s face between her hands and kissed her sweetly, letting her know she was with her all the way.

They continued their trek stopping to set up motion activated cameras along the way. Their conversation was one sided with Sage doing all the talking and Court resorting to charades to answer her wife’s questions.

They crested the mountain, and both gasped at the sight in front of them. “This is beautiful,” Sage whispered.

The top of the mountain was shaped like a shallow bowl. The center of the bowl was home to a magnificent lake filled with clear blue water like the water surrounding the island. Court wondered if the ocean water came through the bottom

of the island, rising to fill the bowl-shaped mountain top. She caught Sage's hand and they walked to the edge of the lake. She was surprised to see fresh-water fish slowly moving through the lake. The area around the lake looked like an immaculately kept city park. Grass grew at a perfect height beneath the shade trees that were not indigenous of tropical islands.

Sage eased an earplug from her ear. To her surprise the high, whining sound was gone. "What is this place?"

"Heaven," Court breathed. "At least what I dreamed heaven would look like."

A volcanic crater is an approximately circular depression in the ground caused by volcanic activity