



# Lost At Sea With A Billionaire (Billionaire Row #5)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Pharmaceutical titan Jonathan Black is used to controlling everything in his orbit.

After developing a groundbreaking treatment that saved countless lives, he's built an empire on his brilliance and is accustomed to praise as a direct result.

What he never counted on was being captivated by the fiery chef he hired for his luxury yacht vacation.

Janet Banks accepted the high-paying chef position for one reason only: to fund her dream restaurant.

She didn't expect the instant spark when she met her demanding, impossibly arrogant, handsome employer.

She's determined to keep that attraction at arm's length.

But when catastrophe strikes, their boundaries crumble as they fight for survival, and before long, their desires can no longer be ignored.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

I never expected a phone call to change my life, but here I was, staring at an opportunity that would either resurrect my dream or make me lose what little sanity I had left.

“Girl, it’s triple your standard rate,” Melanie, my sister, who’d been managing my business affairs, squealed through the phone. “You’d be absolutely insane to turn this down.”

I paced my kitchen floor, the same floor I’d stood on for countless hours perfecting recipes for my failed restaurant. It had been six months since I’d locked those doors. The wound remained fresh, like salt in an open cut.

“Working for some rich asshole on his yacht isn’t exactly what I had in mind when I went to culinary school,” I replied, running my fingers over the counter where I’d rolled countless pastries and chopped through garden-fresh vegetables.

“But it could fund your dream again,” Melanie pressed. “Two weeks cooking for one man, and you’d have enough for a serious down payment on a new restaurant space.”

I stopped pacing, my hand frozen mid-air. “How’d you even get this offer?”

“He saw you on ‘Extreme Chef: Wilderness Edition.’ He said he was impressed by your resourcefulness.”

My mind flashed back to that ridiculous competition—cooking over open flames

during torrential rain, foraging for ingredients in dense woods while competitors whined about conditions.

I'd been running on pure adrenaline. I still couldn't believe I'd won.

My daddy's survival training had come through when I needed it most. He would've been so proud.

"I don't know, Melanie."

"What the hell, Janet? You're broke," she cut in, her usual subtlety nowhere to be found. "Your restaurant savings are gone, and those sad frozen dinners you've been eating are an insult to your talent."

The truth in her words stung, but I couldn't deny it. "That's not fair."

"Fair? Life ain't fair, honey. This could be exactly what you need—get away for a while, cook amazing food, make ridiculous money."

I sighed, glancing at the stack of unpaid bills on my counter. "What's his name?"

"Jonathan Black. He's a pharmaceutical mogul. He created some breakthrough treatment for antibiotic-resistant infections after his sister nearly died from one."

"Never heard of him."

"That's because you've lived under a rock since Flavors closed. He's everywhere. Young, filthy rich, and unbelievably handsome."

"I don't care if he looks like Idris Elba," I interrupted. "If he's paying that kind of money, he's going to be impossible to please."

“Is that a, yes?”

I closed my eyes, thinking of my restaurant dreams slipping further away with each passing day. “Two weeks, you say?”

“That’s it, and that’s all.”

I groaned. “Fine. Send me the details.”

“That’s my girl! You won’t regret it, I promise.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’m a sure motherfucker,” she laughed loudly, and I rolled my eyes even as a smile formed on my lips.

One week later, I stood at the marina with my knife roll clutched in one hand and my duffel bag in the other, staring at the most enormous yacht I’d ever seen. Three decks of gleaming white perfection stretched before me, making me feel smaller with each step I took toward it.

A Black woman in a crisp white uniform approached me with her posture military straight. She had a pixie cut, sharp arched brows, and a wide nose that she tried to thin with contour.

“Ms. Banks?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Sandra, Mr. Black’s personal assistant. The rest of the crew is already aboard. You’re the last to arrive.” Her tone suggested this was between a cardinal sin and a

federal offense.

“My flight was delayed,” I said, though I didn’t owe her any explanation.

“Mmm,” she hummed, not bothering to offer help with my bags. “Follow me.”

I trailed behind her up the gangway, trying not to gawk at the obscene display of wealth surrounding me. The polished teak decks gleamed in the sunlight, chrome fixtures sparkled, and everything reeked of casual luxury that reminded me I was not in my world anymore.

“The kitchen is this way,” Sandra said, leading me through a door and down a corridor. “Mr. Black has specific dietary preferences that were sent to you. Did you review them?”

“Thoroughly,” I replied. No allergens, preference for high-protein meals, an aversion to overly sweet desserts. Simple enough.

She stopped at a doorway. “This is the kitchen. Your quarters are one deck down. I’ll show you after you meet Mr. Black.”

My heart skipped. “He’s in there now?”

“Yes. He likes to approve all staff personally.”

Great. Straight off a commercial flight to meet my new billionaire boss. I smoothed my chef’s jacket and followed her in.

The kitchen was a chef’s dream—everything was top of the line with more counter space than my entire restaurant had offered. Floor-to-ceiling windows provided a panoramic view of the water, but my attention was immediately drawn to the man

standing at the center of it all.

Jonathan Black was... overwhelming. He was at least six-foot-five, with broad shoulders that strained against his shirt and biceps that looked like they could bench-press me without breaking a sweat.

Dark skin gleamed under the kitchen lights, and his sharp features were so perfectly structured they belonged in a museum.

His faded haircut accentuated a strong jawline, and his neatly trimmed goatee framed full lips that seemed permanently set in a serious line.

He wore no jacket, just a white button-down with sleeves rolled up, revealing powerful forearms dusted with hair.

“Mr. Black, this is Janet Banks, the chef,” Sandra announced.

His dark eyes assessed me from head to toe in the way someone might inspect a racehorse before placing a bet. But something else behind his perusal made my skin tingle—a flare of interest, perhaps? Or maybe that was just my imagination working overtime.

“Ms. Banks,” he said, his deep voice shooting tingles down my skin. “I enjoyed watching you on ‘Extreme Chef.’ You have remarkable ingenuity.”

“Thank you,” I said, gripping my knife roll tighter. “However, I’m more comfortable in a kitchen than a forest.”

A slight smile curved his lips, transforming his face in a way that made my stomach do an unexpected flip. “I certainly hope so. This trip is important to me. I need everything to be on point.”

“I understand,” I said, sounding more confident than I felt. “I’ve reviewed your preferences, and prepared menu plans for your approval.”

He raised an eyebrow, surprise flickering across his features. “Already? Impressive.”

“It’s my job,” I replied.

“Your job starts now. I’d like to sample something before we depart.” His eyes held mine. “Consider it an audition.”

My spine stiffened. “An audition? I thought I was already hired.”

“You are. But I like to know exactly what I’m getting.” The challenge in his gaze was unmistakable.

Sandra shifted uncomfortably beside me. “Mr. Black, perhaps Ms. Banks would like to settle in first?—”

“It’s fine,” I said, setting my duffel down and stepping further into the kitchen. “What would you like me to prepare?”

Jonathan crossed his arms, the movement causing his biceps to flex impressively. “Surprise me. Use whatever you find here. You have thirty minutes.”

With that, he turned and left, and Sandra trailed behind him like an obedient puppy.

I stood alone in the gleaming kitchen, my irritation building with each passing second. An audition? After I’d already been hired? After I’d packed up my life and flown across the country? Who did this man think he was?

A billionaire who’s paying triple your rate, a voice in my head reminded me.

I sighed. If he wanted an audition, I'd give him one he wouldn't forget.

I opened the refrigerator, pleased to find it fully stocked with ingredients that would make any chef confident with this sudden challenge.

My mind raced through the endless options as I assessed what I had to work with.

I needed something simple but elegant that would show technique without exaggeration.

Twenty-five minutes later, I'd prepared a seared sea scallop with brown butter, lemon, and capers, served with roasted asparagus. Classic flavors executed perfectly—a statement of confidence rather than flash.

Right on time, Jonathan returned, minus Sandra, and along with him, a spicy aphrodisiac, incredibly masculine, drifted from him. He surveyed the plate I'd prepared, with no expression in his gaze.

“Please,” I said, trying to remove myself from the spell his scent lured me under. I gestured to the stool at the counter.

His powerfully built frame moved onto the stool, though he was still so tall he looked like he was standing. I placed the plate before him, then stepped back, resisting the urge to explain each component.

He took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. His eyes closed briefly, and when they opened again, they locked with mine.

“The scallop is perfectly cooked,” he said. “You didn't feel the need to complicate it.”



“Sometimes simplicity is more challenging than complexity,” I replied. “Anyone can hide flaws under layers of sauces and garnishes.”

He took another bite, then another. “You’re not intimidated by me.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway. “Should I be?”

A genuine smile spread across his face, transforming his features from merely handsome to downright drop-dead gorgeous. “Most people are.”

“A kitchen is my territory, not yours. Nobody intimidates me on my turf.”

He chuckled and finished the dish in silence, then pushed the plate away. “You’re hired. For real this time.”

“I was already hired,” I reminded him, unable to keep the annoyance from my tone.

He stood, towering over me. “Now you’re hired on my terms, not my assistant’s.”

“And what are your terms?” I asked, suddenly aware of how close our bodies were, near enough that I could feel the heat radiating from him.

“Excellence. Every time. No shortcuts.” His gaze was intense as if searching for something beneath my surface. “Can you deliver that, Ms. Banks?”

“Janet is fine,” I said. “No need to be formal. And yes, I can deliver excellence. Every time.”

“Good.” He nodded, then checked his watch—a timepiece that probably cost more than my entire culinary school tuition. “We depart in one hour. Dinner is at eight. I’ll have Sandra show you to your quarters so you can settle in.”

As if summoned by the mention of her name, Sandra appeared in the doorway. “Everything satisfactory, Mr. Black?”

“More than,” he replied, his eyes still on me. “Janet will do nicely.” He nodded again, then left the kitchen with long, confident strides.

It wasn’t until he disappeared that I realized my heart was pounding like I’d just sprinted up a flight of stairs.

“This way to your quarters,” Sandra said, eyeing me with curiosity.

I followed her, but my mind was racing. Two weeks on this yacht with Jonathan Black. Triple my standard rate. Half my sanity, probably.

But as I thought of his smile when I stood my ground, I felt a flutter of warmth that I couldn’t excuse for professional pride.

I needed to squash it immediately. Jonathan Black was my employer, nothing more.

And I had restaurant dreams to resurrect, which depended on me keeping my head on straight.

No matter how tingling his chuckle was.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

The gleaming stainless-steel kitchen became my sanctuary in the midst of all the luxury I couldn't relate to.

My fingers traced the edge of the commercial-grade stovetop, appreciating its craftsmanship more than the gold-plated fixtures in my quarters.

This kitchen was every chef's dream—with more counter space than I'd had in my entire restaurant.

"Is everything to your liking?"

I jumped at the sound of Jonathan's deep voice behind me, my hand still clutching the santoku knife I'd been unpacking from my roll.

"Jesus! You move awfully quietly for such a large man."

"I'm a former basketball player," he said, moving further into the kitchen, his presence immediately shrinking the expansive kitchen. "You learn to be light on your feet."

I turned back to my unpacking, trying to ignore how his subtle but distinctly masculine cologne seemed to wrap around me. My fingers curled around my favorite knife as I unwrapped it from its protective cloth.

"That's a unique blade," he said, moving closer to inspect it, close enough that I

could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“My father gave it to me when I graduated culinary school.” I held it up, the overhead lights dancing along the Damascus steel pattern. “Japanese steel. Holds an edge better than anything I’ve ever used.”

“May I?” he asked, extending his hand.

I hesitated. Letting someone handle my knives was like letting a stranger hold my baby. But I decided to trust him, placing the handle in his palm.

“The balance is perfect,” he murmured, testing its weight with reverence. His massive hands cradled my most prized possession with unexpected gentleness. “You keep it immaculate.”

“Believe it or not, a dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp one,” I said, watching him admire the blade.

He returned it with care, handle first. “How did you become a chef?”

“My father was military. We moved constantly,” I slid the knife back into its protective sleeve. “But food always grounded us—made every new place feel like home. I’d incorporate different cultures through ingredients but shape those flavors in a way that still reminded us of who we were.”

“And you? How does one become a pharmaceutical magnate?”

He leaned against the counter, crossing arms so thick they strained the fabric of his shirt. “My sister nearly died from an antibiotic-resistant infection while I was in college. I changed my major from business to biochemistry the next semester.”

“That’s quite a pivot.”

“Life has a way of redirecting our paths.” His dark brown eyes locked with mine for a beat longer than necessary and heat slipped down my vertebrae. “I’ll let you get settled. We’ll discuss the menu for the trip after you’ve had time to familiarize yourself with the kitchen.”

He pushed away from the counter and his arm brushed against mine, sending an electric jolt straight to my pussy. I worked hard not to moan, surprised at my body’s response to his bump. If that was all it took to arouse me, I wondered what a real bump with him would be like.

Seriously, Janet?

I cleared my thoughts and focused on his mouth, voice, and the words that slipped through those kissable lips.

“Your skills are exactly what I need for this trip,” he said, his vocals dropping to a tone that made my stomach flutter. “Many applied, but your intensity caught my attention.”

The heat in his gaze lingered for another long moment before he turned and strode from the kitchen, leaving me standing there with my pulse racing and warmth spreading through my body that had nothing to do with the kitchen temperature.

Two hours later, I had every cabinet memorized and a preliminary menu drafted. Fresh seafood that still smelled of the ocean, prime cuts of meat, and produce so perfect it looked artificial.

“Knock, knock,” Sandra called from the doorway. “Mr. Black would like to review the menus with you in the main salon.”

I wiped my hands on a nearby towel. “Lead the way.”

The main salon oozed understated luxury—cream leather seating, polished wood accents, and floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the marina. Jonathan sat at a glass table, reviewing documents with the focused intensity of a surgeon prepping for an operation.

“Janet,” he said, looking up as I entered. “Please, sit.”

I took the chair across from him, sliding my menu draft between us. His presence felt even more imposing in this intimate setting, and I caught myself sitting straighter.

“I’ve prepared several options based on your preferences,” I explained. “High-protein meals with an emphasis on fresh ingredients and lighter desserts.”

He reviewed the document expressionless. “You’ve included fish every day.”

“Fresh catches will be available at each port,” I replied. “I can adjust if you prefer.”

“No, I appreciate seafood. Just an observation.” He flipped to the second page. “Breakfast seems... elaborate.”

“I believe in starting the day right,” I said, unconsciously squaring my shoulders. “But if you’d prefer something simpler?—”

“I didn’t say that.” A hint of amusement played at the corners of his mouth, softening his serious demeanor. “I’m actually surprised to find someone who takes breakfast as seriously as I do.”

“The most important meal deserves proper attention.”

He tapped a spot on the menu. “Tell me about this dish. The herb-crusted rack of lamb with rosemary jus.”

“It’s one of my signatures,” I said, leaning forward as passion for my craft took over.

“The herbs create a textural contrast to the tender meat, while the jus adds depth without overwhelming the natural flavor of the lamb.” I gestured with my hands as I spoke.

“I’ve paired it with gratin dauphinois and honey-glazed carrots for balance. ”

“I love your passion for food,” he said, his intense gaze sending a shiver of warmth down my spine.

“Food connects us,” I replied, searching for the right words. “A properly prepared meal creates an experience that transcends mere sustenance.”

“And you believe you can create that experience on this yacht?”

“I know I can.”

He studied me for a long moment before nodding. “I agree. This all looks excellent.” He slid the menu back toward me, our fingers brushing momentarily.

The brief contact sent a current up my arm that made me suck in a sharp breath. I pulled my hand back quickly, pretending to adjust the papers while willing my racing heart to slow down.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “There’s one addition I’d like to make. The night before we reach Saint Barthélemy, I’m hosting a small business dinner. Four guests, plus myself.”

“Not a problem. Any dietary restrictions I should know about?”

“I’ll have Sandra provide those details,” he said, rising to his feet. “The menu otherwise has my full approval.”

“Thank you,” I gathered my notes, conscious of his eyes still on me. “I’ll start preparing for tomorrow’s meals right away.”

“Don’t work too late,” he said, his voice softening. “We set sail at dawn.”

I prepped for our first breakfast at sea, the rhythm of my knife against the cutting board matching the yacht’s gentle rocking. We’d moved from the marina to open water earlier that evening, and the kitchen was now my command center.

The repetitive motion of chopping fresh herbs soothed my nerves. I’d almost found my zone when the kitchen door opened, and I looked up to see Jonathan watching me work, his shoulder against the doorframe.

“Do you always prepare this far in advance?” he asked, stepping into the kitchen.

“In culinary school, they drill ‘mise en place’ into us—everything in its place before cooking begins,” I explained, not breaking my rhythm. “It’s practically a religion in professional kitchens.”

“Mise en place,” he repeated, pronouncing it perfectly. “French seems fitting for such an elegant process.”

He moved closer, his eyes tracking the movement of my knife. “You make it look effortless.”

“Years of practice will do that.” I slid the chopped herbs into a small glass container.



“What brings you to the kitchen at this hour? Hungry?”

“Restless,” he admitted. “I find it difficult to sleep the first night at sea.”

I wiped my hands and turned to face him. “I could make you some chamomile tea. It might help.”

“I don’t want to disrupt your work.”

“It’s no disruption.” I filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove. “I’m nearly finished anyway.”

Jonathan sat at the counter, watching me move around the kitchen. In the confined space, I was acutely aware of how his shoulders strained against his shirt and his cologne mingled with the scent of fresh herbs.

“Tell me about your restaurant,” he said suddenly.

I paused, surprised by the question. “How did you know I had one?”

“Research. You owned ‘Flavors’ in Seattle for three years before it closed.”

“Failed,” I corrected, measuring loose tea leaves into a strainer. “It failed. No point in sugar-coating it.”

“What happened?”

I sighed, focusing on the steeping tea rather than his intense gaze. “The usual story. Location issues, rising costs, insufficient capital to weather the slow periods.”

“But the food was exceptional,” he stated rather than asked.

“The food was never the problem.” I placed the cup before him. “Be careful, it’s hot.”

He wrapped his large hands around the cup, the size contrast making the porcelain look almost comical. “You’ll open another one,” he said.

Again, not a question but a statement of fact.

“That’s the plan. Once I save enough capital for another attempt.” I returned to cleaning my station. “This job helps with that.”

“A strategic decision, then.”

“Everything I do is strategic,” I said with a half-smile. “Including accepting triple my rate to cook for a demanding billionaire.”

He chuckled, the sound deep and surprisingly warm. “Am I that demanding?”

“You made me audition after I was already hired,” I reminded him.

“Fair point.” He sipped the tea. “This is good.”

“It’s just dried flowers and hot water,” I teased. “Nothing award-winning.”

“You undersell yourself, Janet.”

The way he said my name—with a hint of intrigue—made me pause.

“What made you choose me?” I asked. “Surely there are chefs with more impressive credentials.”

“Credentials don’t interest me. Character does.” He set down the cup. “I watched you

on that show, cooking in impossible conditions, never complaining, never sacrificing quality in spite of the circumstances.”

“It was just a competition.”

“It revealed your character.” His gaze held mine. “You don’t cut corners. Neither do I.”

The kettle whistled, jarring me out of our connection. I turned to remove it from the heat, semi-grateful for the distraction.

“Thank you for the tea,” Jonathan said, rising from his seat. “I should let you finish.”

My hands busied themselves with wiping down the counter. “Sleep well, Mr. Black.”

“Jonathan,” he corrected, his voice a deep rumble. He stood, towering in the doorway. “My name is Jonathan.”

“Jonathan,” I repeated, the name feeling unexpectedly intimate on my tongue.

He smiled—a genuine expression that transformed his face—before turning to leave. His broad shoulder brushed the doorframe as he exited, his presence lingering long after he’d gone.

I leaned against the counter, trying to steady my breathing. The yacht’s gentle motion beneath my feet wasn’t the only thing making me feel unbalanced. I needed to maintain professional distance, but something about Jonathan Black made that increasingly difficult.

I closed my eyes, fingers gripping the edge of the stainless steel. I was here for the money, my future restaurant, and a second chance at my dream. Not for the way his

presence made my pulse quicken or how his gaze seemed to see right through me.

“Focus, Janet,” I muttered to myself, returning to my prep work with renewed resolve. “Just do your damn job.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

Five days into our voyage, I'd settled into a comfortable rhythm.

The kitchen had become my sanctuary of order and creativity, far removed from the chaos of my former restaurant's closing.

Each meal served to Jonathan earned appreciative nods, sometimes even rare smiles that transformed his serious face and sent my heart into an annoying flutter.

"The halibut tonight was exceptional," Jonathan said, entering the kitchen as I finished cleaning. His sudden presence still startled me, but I was getting better at hiding it.

I wiped my hands with a towel, pleased by the compliment. "Lemon, capers, white wine, and a touch of dill."

He moved beside me, close enough that our arms almost touched. His distinctly masculine cologne mingled with the lingering scent of dinner. "The crew says you're the best chef they've ever had onboard."

"The crew talks about me?" I stacked the last plate in the cabinet, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Among other things." Jonathan leaned against the counter, his impressive frame casting a shadow across the gleaming surfaces. "They're also talking about the weather."

I glanced through the porthole. The sky had darkened since afternoon, and ominous clouds gathered on the horizon. The vibrant sunset from earlier had given way to an angry purple bruise spreading across the sky.

“Looks like rain,” I said.

“The captain mentioned a storm system developing.”

His tone remained casual, unconcerned.

The ship’s first mate appeared in the doorway, his expression tense enough to set off alarm bells in my head. “Mr. Black, may I have a word? The weather report just came in.”

Jonathan straightened, his relaxed demeanor instantly replaced with the commanding presence I’d first encountered. “Can it wait until morning, Elliot? We’re three days from Saint Barthélemy, and I need to prepare for those meetings.”

“Sir, the system’s intensified significantly. The captain strongly recommends changing course to avoid the worst of it.”

“And delay our arrival?” Jonathan’s jaw tightened visibly. “The meteorologist I spoke with yesterday said it would pass well north of us.”

“That was yesterday,” Elliot pressed, his voice tighter. “Things have changed.”

I watched Jonathan’s profile harden, the muscle in his jaw twitching slightly. “Tell the captain to maintain course but keep monitoring. If conditions worsen significantly, we’ll reevaluate.”

The first mate hesitated, clearly wanting to say more, then nodded. “Yes, sir.”

After he left, I raised an eyebrow at Jonathan. “Shouldn’t you listen to your captain about things like this?”

“We have the most sophisticated weather monitoring equipment available.” He dismissed my concern with a wave of his large hand. “These systems often look worse on radar than they actually are.”

I wasn’t convinced, but this was his yacht and his call. “If you say so.”

He checked his watch. “I should review those contracts before bed. Goodnight, Janet.”

“Goodnight, Jonathan.”

I finished in the kitchen before heading to my quarters, pausing at a porthole to study the gathering darkness.

The yacht’s gentle rocking had developed a more pronounced sway that made my stomach tense.

Rain began to patter against the glass, soft at first, then with increasing intensity that matched my growing concern.

Sleep came fitfully that night, punctuated by the rising sounds of wind and rain battering the yacht. I dozed off sometime after midnight, exhaustion finally overcoming my anxiety.

But somewhere between dreamless sleep, a violent jolt threw me from my bunk. My head smacked against the wall as the yacht pitched sharply sideways.

“What the hell?” Another lurch sent me rolling across the floor, with pain shooting

through my shoulder.

An alarm blared throughout the vessel, its piercing wail more alarming than the howling wind outside. The overhead lights flickered once, then twice, before plunging my cabin into darkness.

I scrambled to my feet, bracing myself against the wall as the yacht heaved beneath me. The emergency lights kicked on, bathing everything in an eerie red glow. I grabbed my jeans and yanked them over my sleep shorts, not bothering to change my tank top. There wasn't time.

The yacht pitched again, and I crashed into my door. Another round of pain shot through my shoulder, but I managed to wrench the handle and stumble into the corridor. The hallway tilted at a sickening angle.

"Ms. Banks!" A crew member—I thought it was the engineer—shouted over the alarms. "Life vests! Port side storage!"

He pointed frantically before losing his balance and slamming into the opposite wall.

I fought my way toward the storage locker, each step a struggle against the violently rocking vessel. The sound of breaking glass and shattering dishes echoed from the kitchen above. All my carefully arranged ingredients and equipment were being destroyed in seconds.

My fingers fumbled with the latch on the storage locker. Inside, orange life vests hung in neat rows. I grabbed one and strapped it on, then seized another.

"Janet!" Jonathan's voice boomed over the chaos.

I turned to see him barreling down the corridor, ducking to avoid hitting his head on a



hanging light fixture. Even in crisis, his powerful frame was commanding.

“What’s happening?” I shouted, tossing him the extra life vest.

He caught it with one hand, muscles flexing as he strapped it on with quick, efficient movements. “The storm hit us faster than predicted. We’re taking on water.” His voice was tight. “The captain’s trying to steer us clear, but navigation is compromised.”

“Compromised how?”

His response disappeared under a deafening crack as lightning struck nearby. The yacht lurched violently, sending us both crashing into the wall.

Jonathan’s arm shot out, steadying me against him. “You okay?”

“Not really! I’m scared to death!”

“We need to get to the upper deck.”

He nodded, locking his jaw. “Stay close.”

We struggled toward the stairs, the yacht’s movements becoming increasingly erratic. Water splashed at our ankles—seawater seeping in from somewhere below.

“Oh my God!”

The force of the waves nearly knocked me backward when we emerged onto the deck. Rain pelted sideways, stinging my skin through my thin tank top. I squinted against the deluge, trying to make sense of the chaos around us.

Crew members scrambled across the deck, securing loose equipment and preparing the life raft. Waves crashed over the rails, sweeping across the polished teak. The sky was barely visible through the downpour, and lightning flashed in jagged streaks across the darkness.

“The captain said to prepare for evacuation!” The first mate shouted, his words nearly lost in the storm’s roar.

Jonathan gripped my arm. “Everyone over here!” His commanding voice cut through the howling storm, drawing the scattered crew toward him.

The yacht lurched again, more violently than before. I lost my footing on the slick deck, sliding toward the rail. My hands grasped wildly, finding nothing but rain and air.

Strong fingers clamped around my wrist at the last second. Jonathan yanked me back from the edge, pulling me against his chest with crushing force.

“I’ve got you,” he said, his voice right against my ear, and his body a solid wall against my rapid heartbeat.

Before I could thank him, a horrific grinding noise tore through the air. The yacht shuddered violently, and a harsh, ear-splitting sound of tearing metal filled the air as the hull collided with something unyielding. We weren’t in open water anymore.

“Rocks!” The captain bellowed from the bridge. “Brace for impact!”

The world tilted sharply. My stomach lurched as gravity shifted. Jonathan’s arms wrapped around me as we tumbled across the deck, crashing against the cabin wall.

Pain exploded through my body. Something hard struck my temple. The world

blurred as darkness crept into my vision.

The last thing I heard was Jonathan shouting my name.

Cold water lapped at my legs, dragging me back to consciousness. My eyelids felt impossibly heavy, and each breath sent shards of pain through my ribs.

“Janet, wake up.”

A large hand patted my cheek with gentleness. I forced my eyes open, squinting against the brightness.

Jonathan’s face hovered above mine, his dark eyes wide with concern. A cut ran along his left cheekbone, and dried blood tracked down to his jawline.

“There you are...” Relief washed over his features. “Don’t move too quickly. You took a nasty hit.”

I ignored his advice and tried to sit up. The world spun violently, forcing me back down with a groan. “Where are we?”

“An island. We washed ashore after the yacht hit the rocks.”

Memory flooded back—the storm, the alarm, the horrible grinding sound as the hull connected with stone. I tried again to sit up, more slowly this time as my hand pressed into the warm sand.

“Where are the others?” I asked, wincing as my fingers probed a tender spot on my forehead.

Jonathan’s expression tightened. “I don’t know. We got separated when the yacht

capsized.” He helped me to a sitting position. “I saw the life raft deploy, but in that storm...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to.

I took stock of our surroundings. We sat on a small beach, curved like a crescent moon between rocky outcroppings.

Behind us, dense tropical vegetation created a wall of green.

And in the water, perhaps fifty yards offshore, the yacht lay partially submerged, its bow thrust upward at an unnatural angle.

“How long was I out?”

“A few hours. The sun’s been up about three hours.”

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the protests from my battered body. “We need to search for the others.”

“I did. I walked the beach in both directions. There’s no sign of anyone.” Jonathan stood, towering beside me. “But the yacht’s accessible at low tide. We should salvage what we can.”

“You went out there already?”

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He nodded toward a pile of items neatly stacked above the tide line—a metal box I recognized as a first aid kit, several bottles of water, a coil of rope, and various other supplies.

“I made two trips while you were unconscious. I’d like to use your expertise for the kitchen and see what food we can recover.”

I brushed sand from my jeans, and my chef’s instincts kicked in. “Let’s go now. Who knows how long that yacht will hold its position.”

Jonathan studied me, his eyes lingering on the injury on my head. “Are you sure you’re up for it? That gash?—”

“I’ll be fine.” The throb intensified as I spoke. “We need supplies more than I need rest.”

A smirk crossed his face. “Extreme Chef’s instincts kicking in?”

“Something like that.” I scanned the beach again, looking for any sign of the others. Nothing but empty sand stretched in both directions. “How do we get out there?”

“Wade at low tide, swim at high. It’s low now. The water’s only chest-deep at the deepest point.”

I nodded, then immediately regretted the movement as pain scurried through my skull. “Let’s go.”

The water felt shockingly cold after the warmth of the sand. I gasped as it reached my waist, my clothes growing heavy as they soaked through.

“Careful here,” Jonathan extended his hand. “The footing gets tricky.”

I took his offered hand, noticing how small mine looked engulfed in his. We picked our way through the water, navigating around jagged rocks and slippery patches of seaweed.

The yacht loomed closer, its sleek lines now broken and battered. The once-gleaming white hull was scraped and dented, streaked with seaweed and sand.

“We need to climb up this side,” Jonathan said, pointing to a section where the yacht’s tilt had created a makeshift ramp. “Watch for sharp edges.”

He went first, his powerful frame scaling the slanted surface with surprising agility. At the top, he turned and reached down to help me up.

Standing on the yacht’s side felt wrong, and gravity pulled me sideways. Jonathan kept a steady hand on my arm as we carefully made our way to a broken window that now served as our entrance.

Inside, the yacht’s interior had become an alien landscape. Furniture that once stood on the floor now projected from walls. Shattered glass and broken fixtures created a hazardous obstacle course that we had to navigate with extreme care.

“The kitchen’s this way,” I said, picking through the debris. “If it’s not completely underwater.”

We navigated through the tilted corridors, using handholds where we could find them. The kitchen door had been torn from its hinges, allowing us to enter what had

once been my domain.

The sight hit me harder than I expected. My beautiful kitchen laid in ruins—cabinets burst open, equipment scattered, food and broken dishes everywhere. The rhythmic slosh of seawater against the far wall marked where half the room disappeared beneath the waterline.

“What should we prioritize?” Jonathan asked, surveying the chaos.

I snapped into assessment mode. “Anything sealed and non-perishable. Canned goods, pasta, rice.” I pointed to a cabinet that remained mostly intact. “There should be a stash of energy bars in there. And we need tools—my knife roll if you can find it.”

Jonathan nodded and immediately moved toward the cabinet I’d indicated. I waded through broken plates toward another storage area, pulling out canned vegetables and sealed packages of dried fruits.

“I got your knives,” Jonathan called, holding up my waterproof knife roll. “And these.” He showed me a handful of energy bars.

“Perfect.” I continued my search, locating salt, pepper, and other spices in sealed containers. “Any pots or pans survive?”

Jonathan dug through a pile of kitchenware. “Cast iron skillet. Dented but usable. Small pot, too.”

We worked methodically, gathering everything of value. Within twenty minutes, we’d accumulated a respectable pile of salvage.

“How do we get all this back?” I asked, eyeing our haul.

Jonathan unwrapped a waterproof tarp he'd found. "We'll make a bundle, and I'll carry it on my back." He began arranging our findings in the center of the tarp.

"I can carry some, too," I protested.

"You've got a concussion." His tone left no room for argument. "I need you focused on not passing out in the water."

I wanted to argue but knew he was right. My head throbbed, and occasional waves of dizziness washed over me like the tide.

We secured the supplies in the tarp, creating a makeshift backpack with some rope. Jonathan hoisted it onto his broad shoulders, grunting to adjust the weight.

"Anything else essential before we head back?" he asked.

I gave the ruined kitchen one last look. "No. We've got what we need for now."

The journey back to shore proved more challenging than our trip out. The added weight made Jonathan move more cautiously, and the tide had begun to rise, deepening the water in places.

By the time we reached the beach, my legs trembled with exhaustion, and the cut on my head pulsed with renewed pain.

Jonathan set down our salvage, then turned to me. "Sit. Now."

For once, I didn't argue. I sank onto the sand, closing my eyes against the spinning sensation that threatened to overtake me.

I felt him kneel beside me. "Let me see that wound properly."



His fingers gently probed the gash on my forehead. I winced but didn't pull away.

"It needs cleaning, but I don't think you need stitches." He opened the first aid kit, pulling out antiseptic wipes. "This will sting."

The antiseptic burned against the open cut. I bit my lip to keep from crying out.

"Sorry," he muttered, his touch surprisingly soft for such large hands. "Almost done."

Once clean, he applied a butterfly bandage, sealing the edges of the wound together.

"Where'd you learn first aid?" I asked as he packed up the supplies.

"Military school," he replied. "Then refreshers every year for wilderness expeditions. My company sponsors them."

I looked at him with new curiosity. "You never mentioned military school."

"There's a lot we haven't had time to mention, considering we've only known each other for a week." He smirked and closed the first aid kit with a decisive snap. "How do you know so much about survival situations?"

"My dad was military. He taught me everything he knew." I gazed out at the partially submerged yacht. "I never thought I'd need those skills like this."

Jonathan followed my gaze. "We need to make a plan. Shelter, fire, a signal for rescue."

"Food and water," I added. "I don't know how long what we salvaged will last."

"One problem at a time." He stood, surveying the tree line behind us. "First, we need

somewhere to sleep that isn't exposed to the elements."

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the dizziness that threatened to send me back down. "I can help with that."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Positive." I squared my shoulders, determination replacing my fear. "I'm not some helpless chef who can only function in a kitchen."

A genuine smile spread across his face. "I never thought you were."

We stood on the beach, the reality of our situation settling around us like the sand beneath our feet. There was no crew, luxury, or certainty of rescue—just us, a pile of salvaged supplies, and whatever skills we possessed.

"Let's get to work," I said, picking up my knife roll from our supplies. "We've got a long day ahead."

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Jonathan

The makeshift shelter offered minimal protection from the elements, but it would have to do for now.

I'd gathered enough palm fronds and branches to create a roof that wouldn't collapse with the first rainfall.

Janet had been right about using the yacht's salvaged tarp as additional waterproofing.

Her practicality impressed me, though I shouldn't have been surprised.

Her resilience was why I'd requested her specifically for this voyage.

When I saw her on that ridiculous cooking show, battling the elements while creating gourmet meals over an open flame, I knew she possessed something rare—not just talent but determination and an unwillingness to compromise regardless of the circumstances.

"Your shelter-building skills aren't half bad," Janet said, ducking under the palm frond roof to join me. She handed me a bottle of water we'd salvaged from the yacht. "For a pharmaceutical executive."

I accepted the bottle, my fingers brushing against hers. "Military school has its advantages."

“So that’s where you learned to cook, too?”

“Cook is a generous description of what they taught us.” I took a swig from the bottle. “More like learning which field rations were least likely to make you sick.”

Janet settled beside me, close enough that I could smell the saltwater in her hair. The cut on her forehead had scabbed over, but the bruise beneath it had darkened to a deep purple against her brown skin.

“Why did you ask for me specifically?” she asked suddenly.

My hand stilled mid-air. “What?”

“You said other chefs applied for the yacht, but you chose me. Why?”

I considered deflecting but decided against it. There was no point in pretensions now. “I saw you on ‘Extreme Chef.’ The episode where the rainstorm flooded your cooking station.”

“And you thought I’d look good in a chef’s jacket on your yacht?” Her tone held a sharpness I hadn’t heard before.

“No.” I turned to face her directly. “I saw how you handled the situation. Everyone else panicked, abandoned their dishes, and complained to the judges. You adapted. You moved your fire to higher ground, elevated your ingredients on rocks, and used the rain as part of your sauce.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

“You saw a problem and fixed it without drama,” I continued. “That’s rare. Most people fall apart when their plans disintegrate.”

“Like yacht vacations turning into shipwrecks?” She smirked.

“Exactly like that.”

She drew her knees up to her chest, wincing slightly. “So, you wanted me for my crisis management skills? That seems excessive for a two-week charter.”

I hesitated, unsure how to explain without sounding ridiculous. “My life runs on precision. Every meeting, every decision, every investment—all of it is calculated. I value people who maintain standards regardless of circumstances.”

“Control issues,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“You have control issues.” She didn’t phrase it as a question. “You surround yourself with people who won’t disrupt your precisely ordered world.”

Her directness caught me off guard. While most people tiptoed around me, careful not to offend the billionaire, Janet spoke to me as if I was anyone else. It was refreshing and maddening simultaneously.

“I prefer to call it discernment,” I said.

“Call it whatever you want.” She shrugged, then looked out toward the ocean. “Ironic that someone so focused on control would end up here.”

The observation stung more than it should have. After all, she was right. If I’d listened to the captain’s concerns about the weather instead of insisting we maintain our course, we might not be stranded.

“About that,” I said, turning to face her. “I owe you an apology.”

She raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“The captain and crew warned me about the storm. I dismissed their concerns. I was so focused on making our arrival in Saint Barthélemy on schedule that I?—”

“That you made a bad call,” she finished for me.

“Yes.”

She studied me for a long moment. “At least you can admit it.”

“Does that earn me any points?”

“This isn’t a game, Jonathan.” But there was no real anger in her voice. “Though I suppose there are worse people to be stranded with than a control freak with survival training.”

I laughed. “Your ability to find humor in a disaster is another reason I hired you.”

“You hired me because I’m funny?”

“I hired you because you’re extraordinary.”

Her eyes met mine, and for a moment, neither of us spoke. The air between us shifted, charged even.

She broke contact first, clearing her throat. “We should go through the supplies again. Take inventory of what we have.”

“Right.” I welcomed the return to practicality. “Let’s be methodical.”

We spread our salvaged items on the tarp: first aid kit, water bottles, canned goods, my satellite phone, waterlogged and useless, her knife roll, rope, matches in a waterproof container, some clothing, a few blankets, and various other items we’d managed to rescue from the yacht.

“Not bad for a first salvage,” Janet said, organizing the food supplies. “Though we’ll need to find fresh water soon. These bottles won’t last more than a few days.”

I nodded, mentally calculating our needs. “There must be a freshwater source on the island. The vegetation is too lush otherwise.”

“Tomorrow we should explore inland,” she suggested. “And we need to set up some kind of signal for passing ships.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said, pointing toward the yacht’s broken hull. “If we could retrieve the emergency flares?—”

“They’d be in the bridge,” Janet said. “Which was underwater when we were there earlier.”

“The tide will be lower in the morning. I could try then.”

She frowned. “That’s risky. The yacht’s position could shift at any time.”

“It’s a calculated risk.” I met her gaze steadily. “Unless you have a better idea?”

She seemed about to argue, then sighed. “No. But you’re not going alone.”

“Your head injury?—”

“Is not debilitating,” she cut me off. “And four hands are better than two. We’ll go together.”

The assertiveness in her tone surprised me. Most people simply deferred to my decisions, but Janet challenged me at every turn. It was oddly thrilling.

“Alright,” I conceded. “We’ll go together.”

She nodded, apparently satisfied, and returned to organizing our supplies.

The silence between us grew comfortable as we worked.

When had that happened? In the short time we’d spent together on the yacht, I’d noticed how easily conversation flowed between us.

Even our silences felt natural, not the awkward pauses I often experienced with others.

“Tell me something,” Janet said suddenly.

“What do you want to know?”

“That night before the storm, you mentioned working on contracts. Were you really preparing for meetings, or was that just an excuse?”

Her question took me off guard. “Why would I need an excuse?”

She shrugged. “I saw how you looked at me sometimes when you thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

Warmth settled across my skin. “I respect professional boundaries.”



“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I sighed, running a hand over my face. “Yes, I was actually preparing for meetings. A pharmaceutical partnership that would expand access to the antibiotic we developed.”

“The one you created after your sister got sick?”

“Yes. I’m glad you remembered.”

“Of course.” She arranged the canned goods by type. “It’s not every day you meet someone who changed careers to save lives.”

“I didn’t save her life. The doctors did.” I paused as memories flooded back. “But watching her suffer, seeing how close she came to dying from what should have been a treatable infection, changed my perspective.”

“In what way?”

I considered the question. Janet’s disarming way of asking things directly made me want to answer honestly.

“It made me realize how pointless many of my ambitions were,” I admitted. “I was on track to become another Wall Street shark, making millions shuffling other people’s money around. Angela’s illness forced me to confront the emptiness of that path.”

Janet was watching me with unexpected intensity. “So, you switched from finance to biochemistry? That’s not exactly an easy pivot.”

“I’ve never been interested in easy.”

“Clearly.” She gestured to our makeshift camp on a deserted island.

I chuckled. “This wasn’t exactly in my five-year plan.”

“What was?” she asked. “In your five-year plan?”

The question was innocuous enough, but something about how she asked made me pause. Her interest seemed genuine, not the calculated attention I typically received from people hoping to benefit from my wealth or connections.

“Expanding our antibiotic research, primarily,” I said. “Moving into treatments for other resistant infections. Maybe stepping back from the business side to focus on research again.”

“You miss being in the lab,” she observed.

“Yes.” The admission came easily. “Running the company is necessary, but it’s not where my passion lies.”

“Like me and cooking,” she said. “The business side of my restaurant consumed so much energy that I sometimes forgot why I became a chef in the first place.”

“Which was?”

“The pure creation.” Her face brightened as she spoke. “Taking raw ingredients and transforming them into something that brings people joy.”

The passion in her voice resonated deep inside me. How long had it been since I’d spoken with someone who understood that kind of drive?

Night had fallen fully now, the darkness broken only by the small fire we’d built. The

flames cast shifting patterns of light across Janet's face, highlighting the resolve in her eyes.

"We should rest," I said finally. "Tomorrow will be demanding."

She nodded, suppressing a yawn. "You're right." She hesitated. "About the sleeping arrangements..."

I gestured to the shelter. "It's big enough for both of us to have space. I'll stay on my side."

"Such a gentleman," she said with a hint of teasing. "And here I thought billionaires were used to getting whatever they wanted."

"Is that what you think of me?" The question came out more vulnerable than I'd intended.

She studied me for a long moment. "I think you're more complicated than the wealthy businessman who first interviewed me in that kitchen." She stood up, brushing sand from her jeans. "Goodnight, Jonathan."

"Goodnight, Janet."

As she crawled into our makeshift shelter, I remained by the fire, my thoughts churning. When I first saw Janet on that cooking show, I was captivated by her competence and unwillingness to compromise with the odds of the obstacles. I'd wanted that energy on my yacht, around my business associates.

What I hadn't anticipated was the woman herself—direct, perceptive, and utterly unimpressed by my wealth or status.

She saw through the facade I presented to the world, challenging me at every turn.

Not to mention, she was flawlessly gorgeous, with brown eyes that saw straight through me, shoulder-length hair, and a curvy body.

I could admit that my mouth watered when she walked into my yacht's kitchen, and I wanted to taste her as much as her food.

But I held my primal desires in check for professional poise.

And now here we were, stranded together on an unknown island, completely removed from the power dynamics that would normally define our relationship. There was no crew to maintain professional distance and no business associates watching my every move.

Just us, stripped of pretenses, forced to rely on each other for survival.

It was terrifying and, strangely, exhilarating.

I doused the fire and went to the shelter, carefully staying on my designated side. Janet's breathing had already deepened into sleep, her face relaxed and vulnerable in the dim light filtering through the palm fronds.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges: the yacht's precarious position, our limited supplies, and the uncertain prospect of rescue. But for the first time in years, I wasn't meticulously planning three steps ahead. There was something freeing about being forced into the present moment.

Perhaps Janet was right. I did have control issues. And maybe this island was the universe's way of forcing me to let go.

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Jonathan

One week became seven days of sand in places I never knew existed. Seven days without a proper shower, a real bed, or any contact with the outside world. Seven days of watching my multi-million-dollar yacht sink deeper into the water with each passing tide.

The makeshift calendar I'd created using stones on a flat piece of driftwood marked our time on this island. It was a useless exercise, but it gave me some semblance of control in a situation where I had none.

"You're doing it again," Janet said, approaching from the tree line. She carried a makeshift basket woven from palm fronds, filled with tropical fruit we'd discovered growing inland.

"Doing what?" I stacked another stone in the row.

"That thing where you stare at the yacht like you can will it back to working condition." She set the basket down. "Breakfast is ready, by the way."

I straightened up, feeling the pull of my sore muscles. My hands, once manicured and soft, now bore calluses and minor cuts from our daily work. "I'm not used to feeling this... ineffective."

"Ineffective? We have shelter, food, water, and fire. I'd say we're doing pretty damn well." She handed me a piece of fruit—some tropical variety I couldn't name. "Try this one. It's sweet."

I took a bite. The juice ran down my chin, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand—a small action that would have been unthinkable in my previous life.

“We’re surviving, not thriving.”

“Spoken like a true CEO.” She sat beside me on the log we’d positioned as our dining area. “Most people would consider not dying on a deserted island a major win.”

Her practicality constantly surprised me. Where I saw problems, she saw solutions. When I focused on what we lacked, she inventoried what we had.

“Where did you learn to weave baskets?” I asked, nodding toward her creation.

“YouTube. Dad and I used to watch survival videos together. I thought it was cool.” She took a bite of her own fruit. “Never imagined I’d actually need the skills.”

“Bravo.”

Her smile warmed me, and we ate in silence, watching the waves crash against the shore. The morning air carried a salty freshness that reminded me this wasn’t all bad. At least the air here was cleaner than in any city.

“I need to check the signal fire,” I said, finishing my fruit. “Make sure it’s visible from the water.”

Janet nodded. “I’ll come with you. I need to get more of these rocks for the water collection system anyway.”

We walked along the beach toward the highest point on our side of the island.

Janet had worn one of my salvaged shirts, tied at the waist to accommodate her

frame.

Her jeans had been cut off at mid-thigh, exposing brown skin that I dreamed of gripping, to make shorts in the tropical heat.

Even disheveled, with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, she carried herself with a confidence I was increasingly drawn to.

The signal fire sat atop a rocky outcropping, positioned to be visible from multiple angles at sea. We'd built a large pyramid of driftwood, ready to be lit if we spotted a ship or plane.

"The wood's still dry," Janet observed, checking underneath the tarp we'd positioned as protection from rain. "We should add more, though. That last pile is getting low."

I nodded. "I'll gather some this afternoon." I scanned the horizon out of habit, knowing the chances of seeing a passing ship were slim. According to the navigation charts we'd salvaged, we were well off the usual shipping lanes.

"You're starting to bake," Janet said, glancing at my arms as I adjusted the signal tarp. "Your skin is darker, more chocolaty," she giggled. "It looks good on you. Yummy, even."

I raised an eyebrow. "Yummy? You sound as if you want a taste, Chef Banks."

Her giggle deepened. "It's just an observation." She tossed a rock from hand to hand, deciding to steer the conversation to safer grounds. "Though I suppose even billionaires need occasional ego boosts."

"My ego is the least of my concerns right now."

“Is it, though?” She fixed me with that direct gaze that seemed to see through me. “Your biggest struggle this week hasn’t been the physical challenges. It’s been letting go of control.”

I wanted to deny it, but she wasn’t wrong. “Having money means having options. Always.” I ran a hand over my fade, the edges now growing out. “Out here, my bank account means nothing.”

“Welcome to how the rest of us live.” She gestured around us. “We have limited options, and we make the best of what we have.”

“Is that what you did with your restaurant?” I asked.

Her expression tightened. “That’s different.”

“Is it? You had a dream, limited resources, and did your best.”

“And failed.” She turned away, picking up more rocks.

“Failure is temporary unless you make it permanent.” I took the rocks from her hands, our fingers brushing. “You’ll open another restaurant.”

“Easy for you to say. You could lose millions and still live comfortably.”

“This isn’t about money.”

She scoffed. “It’s always about money.”

“No.” I stepped closer, close enough to reach her soul through her brown eyes. “It’s about passion. You have it. I’ve seen it when you cook, even here with limited ingredients.”



She didn't back away, but I could see the conflict in her eyes. "Why do you care about my restaurant dreams?"

A question I wasn't entirely sure how to answer. Why did I care? A week ago, Janet Banks was an employee, a chef hired to perform a service. Now...

"Because I recognize drive when I see it," I said finally. "And it would be a waste if you gave up."

She studied me for a moment before turning back to her rock collecting. "We should head back. I need to check on the water filtration system."

I recognized the deflection but didn't push. The week had taught me that Janet processed things in her own time, on her own terms. Another aspect of control I had to surrender.

We gathered rocks in silence, loading them into our makeshift carriers. As we turned to head back to camp, Janet paused, looking out over the ocean.

"Jonathan?"

"Yes?"

"Do you really think we'll be rescued?"

The vulnerability in her question caught me off guard. Janet rarely showed uncertainty, focusing instead on immediate needs and practical solutions.

"Yes," I said, with more conviction than I felt. "But until then, we keep surviving."

She nodded once, squaring her shoulders, and we continued our walk back to camp.

The afternoon stretched into the evening as we completed our now-routine tasks. Janet checked and refined the water collection system we'd built using salvaged plastic and leaves while I reinforced our shelter against the winds that had picked up over the past two nights.

"I think that'll hold," I said, stepping back to inspect my work. The shelter had evolved from our initial makeshift lean-to into a more substantial hut with walls of woven branches and a sloped roof that channeled rainwater into one of our collection buckets.

"Impressive," Janet said, approaching from the water's edge. "You know, you're surprisingly handy for a billionaire pharmaceutical executive."

I wiped the sweat from my brow. "Military school, remember? We built structures much more complicated than this."

"Rich kid boot camp," she teased, handing me our refilled water bottle.

"It wasn't exactly optional." I took a drink, savoring the coolness. "My father believed in building character through discipline."

"Did it work?"

I considered the question. "In some ways. I learned self-reliance and leadership. But it also taught me to keep everything tightly controlled."

"Hence your current predicament." She gestured around us.

"What about you?" I changed the subject. "What was your childhood like?"

Janet sat on a fallen log near our fire pit. "Nomadic. Military family, moving every

few years. Italy, Germany, Japan, stateside bases.”

“That explains your cooking style,” I observed, joining her. “All those influences.”

“Food was how I found home in each new place.” She began preparing our dinner—fish I’d caught earlier, seasoned with wild herbs she’d discovered. “Learn the local cuisine, and you understand the people.”

I watched her work, her hands moving with grace and skill. “You never mentioned your mother.”

“She left when I was six. Couldn’t handle the military lifestyle.” Her tone remained neutral, but I caught the slight tension in her shoulders. “My dad raised me alone after that.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“It was our normal.” She expertly filleted the fish on a flat stone. “What about your family? Beyond the stern father and ill sister?”

“My mother was the social butterfly, always hosting charity events and galas. She cared more about appearances than substance.” I helped by feeding small sticks into the fire.

“My brother followed in her footsteps. He attended Harvard Business School, married the ‘right’ woman, and took his place at all the proper social functions.”

“And you were the rebel?” She placed the fish on our makeshift grill—salvaged metal from the yacht.

“Not deliberately. I just couldn’t see the point of it all. Even before Angela got sick, I

questioned the path laid out for me.”

Janet turned the fish, the sizzling sound mixing with the crash of waves. “Yet you still ended up wealthy and powerful.”

“Different path, same destination?”

“Something like that.”

The conversation lulled as Janet finished cooking. This past week, we’d settled into an easy rhythm, dividing tasks based on our strengths. Her culinary skills made our basic provisions enjoyable, while my physical strength and mechanical knowledge helped with the heavier work.

“Here,” she said, handing me a palm leaf with my portion. “Not exactly five-star dining, but it’ll keep us going.”

I took a bite, surprised yet again by how good it tasted. “How do you make such basic ingredients taste this good?”

“Technique matters more than fancy equipment.” She joined me, sitting cross-legged on her section of the log. “A lesson every chef learns early.”

“That could apply to many things,” I mused. “We focus so much on acquiring tools and resources that we neglect developing actual skill.”

“Says the man with a yacht.” But there was no malice in her words, just gentle teasing.

“Had a yacht,” I corrected, gesturing toward the increasingly submerged vessel.

We ate as darkness fell, the fire dancing shadows across our small camp. Stars emerged overhead, more brilliant than I'd ever seen in the city.

"When I was little," Janet said, looking up, "my dad would point out constellations wherever we were stationed. No matter how far from home we went, the stars remained constant."

I followed her gaze upward. "Can you still identify them?"

"Some." She pointed. "Orion's belt there. The Big Dipper. Southern Cross low on the horizon."

"That last one helps confirm we're in the southern hemisphere," I noted.

"I knew that from the tropical flora and the position of the midday sun." She glanced at me, brandishing white teeth in the firelight. "Not just a pretty face with a knife."

I laughed, and the sound surprised even me. When was the last time I'd laughed genuinely? "I never assumed you were just anything, Janet."

Our eyes met across the fire, and something shifted in the air between us. A week of survival, of seeing each other stripped of pretense and position, had created a connection I hadn't anticipated.

She broke the contact first, standing to clear our plates. "We should get some rest. Tomorrow, I want to explore the western side of the island. I might find more food sources."

"I'll come with you," I said, rising to help. "After I recheck the yacht. The navigation equipment might still be salvageable if the water level has dropped."

“You’re obsessed with that yacht.”

“Not the yacht itself,” I clarified. “What it represents. Communication. Rescue. Getting back to our lives.”

She paused in her cleaning. “And if rescue doesn’t come soon? What then?”

The question was heavier than it should have been. What then, indeed? How long before temporary survival became permanent existence? How long before we had to accept this island as our new reality?

“Then we adapt,” I said finally. “Like you did on that cooking show. We work with what we have.”

Janet studied me for a long moment. “You’re different than I expected, Jonathan Black.”

“How so?”

“When we met, I thought you were just another entitled rich guy playing with his expensive toys.” She set the clean palm leaves aside. “But you’re more...”

“More?”

“Adaptable,” she finished. “In spite of your control issues.”

“That’s high praise from the survival expert,” I said, smiling and high fiving myself.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “Don’t let it go to your head. You still take unnecessarily long showers in our limited freshwater pool.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

“Practicality is next to survival,” she countered.

We moved around each other easily, banking the fire for the night and securing our camp. Our shelter, while basic, had become oddly comfortable. We’d created separate sleeping areas using salvaged fabric and palm fronds, maintaining a pretense of privacy that grew thinner each day.

As we prepared for sleep, Janet turned to face me. “Jonathan?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad it was you,” she said softly. “That I’m stranded with, I mean. Could have been worse.”

She disappeared inside the hut, leaving me standing in the moonlight, pondering her words.

It could have been worse, indeed. A week ago, I would have considered this situation the worst possible outcome—no communication, no control, no certainty of rescue. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

Because even with everything we lacked, I’d found something unexpected on this island—a connection with someone who saw me, not my wealth or status or accomplishments, but me—someone who challenged, frustrated, and impressed me in equal measure.

I entered the shelter quietly, careful not to disturb Janet in her section. I could just make out her form in the dim light, already relaxed in sleep. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but for now, in this moment, powerlessness didn’t feel quite so

threatening.

There may be freedom in letting go of control.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Jonathan

The yacht's radio equipment lay submerged under two feet of water, its once-blinking lights now dark and lifeless. I waited for low tide, hoping some part of the bridge would be accessible, but the hull had shifted during last night's storm, sinking deeper into the sandbar.

"There has to be something salvageable," I muttered, wading carefully through the tilted cabin.

Salt water stung a fresh cut on my arm as I reached for the communication panel. The sharp edge of broken equipment had sliced me earlier when a sudden wave rocked the yacht, throwing me off balance. I ignored the pain, focusing instead on extracting the radio components.

Ten days on this island, and I still hadn't given up hope of contacting the outside world.

While Janet focused on immediate survival needs, I remained obsessed with rescue.

Not that her approach wasn't practical—it was.

Without her skills, we'd eat raw fish and sleep exposed to the elements.

But someone needed to think long-term, and that someone was me.

I pulled at the radio panel, the metal edges cutting into my palms. With a groan, it

broke free, sending me stumbling backward into the rising water.

“Damn it!” The salt water hit my wound like fire. Blood mixed with seawater created crimson swirls around my arm.

Clutching my prize, I returned to the broken window we used as an entrance. The tide was rising faster than I’d anticipated. Time to go.

I swam awkwardly back to shore, with one arm keeping the radio components above water and the other propelling me forward. Exertion burned my muscles when my feet touched the sand, and my arm throbbed with each heartbeat.

Janet spotted me from our campsite and jogged down to meet me.

“What happened?” She took the equipment from my arms, examining it critically. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing.” I tried to sound dismissive, but the pain had intensified. “Just a scratch.”

She set the radio parts down and grabbed my arm, turning it to inspect the wound. “This isn’t a scratch. It’s a deep cut.” Her eyes narrowed. “How long ago did this happen?”

“Maybe twenty minutes. I was focused on?—”

“On salvaging useless electronics while sitting in bacteria-filled water with an open wound.” She tugged me toward camp with surprising strength. “Sit down. Now.”

I knew better than to argue when Janet used that tone. I followed her to our shelter, where she pushed me onto a makeshift seat and retrieved our first aid kit.

“You’re lucky we have antiseptic left.” She poured water over the wound, washing away sand and blood. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about getting us rescued.” I winced as she dabbed antiseptic onto the cut. “That radio might still have usable parts.”

“Not if you die of infection first.” She worked quickly, cleaning the wound with efficiency. “The radio was underwater for days. It’s corroded beyond repair.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you don’t know when to quit.” Her fingers pressed a clean bandage over the cut, her touch gentler than her words. “There’s persistence, and then there’s pigheadedness.”

I watched her work, noting the furrow between her brows that appeared whenever she concentrated. After ten days together, I’d memorized her expressions, habits, and small movements that revealed her moods.

“I can’t just sit here waiting for someone to find us,” I said as she secured the bandage. “That’s not who I am.”

Janet sat back on her heels, studying me. “And who exactly are you, Jonathan Black? Because from where I’m standing, you’re a man who can’t accept when something’s beyond his control.”

Her words hit harder than they should have. “Is that so wrong? To fight instead of surrender?”

“It is when fighting could get you killed.” She packed up the first aid supplies with quick, angry movements. “What do you think happens to me if you die out here?”

I stared at her for a long moment. I hadn't considered that angle—that my recklessness might impact her survival.

“I didn't think?—”

“No, you didn't.” She stood abruptly. “You were so focused on your goal that you didn't consider the consequences.” She walked a few steps away, then turned back. “Sound familiar? Like ignoring the captain's warning about the storm?”

I grimace as the truth gut punched me.

“You make decisions based on what you want, not what's best for everyone involved. That's why we're here in the first place!”

The accusation sliced deeper than the metal that had cut my arm. And I couldn't deny it. We wouldn't be stranded if I'd listened about the storm and changed course when advised.

“You're right,” I admitted quietly.

She blinked, clearly expecting more resistance. “What?”

“You're right,” I repeated. “About all of it. The storm, the radio, my...” I hesitated, the word sticking in my throat. “My arrogance.”

Janet's expression softened fractionally. She returned to sit beside me, close enough that our shoulders nearly touched.

“It's not arrogance,” she said, her voice gentler now. “It's how you've survived in your world. Making decisions, taking control, pushing through obstacles.” She gestured around us. “But this isn't your world anymore.”

I looked at her, really looked at her. Island life had tanned her brown skin and lightened her hair. Her clothes, my salvaged shirt, and her cut-off jeans hung from her frame, yet she carried herself with a quiet dignity I admired. She'd adapted while I was still fighting against our reality.

"I don't know how to live in this world," I admitted.

"Yes, you do." She touched my bandaged arm lightly. "You've learned more than you realize. That shelter you built, the fish traps, finding fresh water—those weren't skills you had two weeks ago."

She was right again. I'd been so focused on what I couldn't do—fix our situation, call for rescue, return to civilization—that I'd overlooked what I had accomplished.

"We should check those fish traps," I said, standing.

Janet rose with me, her hand still on my arm. "After you rest. That cut needs time."

"I'm fine."

"You're stubborn," she countered, but a smile pulled at her lips. "At least sit while I redress this. The bandage is already soaking through."

I relented, lowering myself back to the seat while she gathered fresh supplies. Thunder rumbled in the distance, promising another evening storm. Our shelter would hold—we'd reinforced it after the last downpour—but we'd be confined to close quarters once the rain began.

Janet returned, kneeling before me to change the bandage. Her fingers worked carefully, never causing additional pain.

“Where did you learn first aid?” I asked, watching her work.

“My father taught me the basics. Then I took a course in college.” She removed the soaked bandage, frowning at the wound beneath. “It’s still bleeding. Press here.” She guided my fingers to hold a clean cloth against the cut.

Our hands touched, and a charging current passed between us. Her eyes met mine, and for a moment, neither of us moved.

My gaze dropped to her mouth—pouty, full, and surprisingly glossed given the lack of supplies.

Once again, she broke contact first, clearing her throat. “Keep pressure on that while I get more antiseptic.”

I did as instructed, watching as she rummaged through our materials. The air between us was still brimming, igniting even with every moment we remained together.

It had been building gradually from the moment we met—lingering glances, casual touches that weren’t entirely casual. Lately, our conversations stretched into the night, long after we should have slept. But we maintained boundaries, keeping the small distance dictated by our circumstances.

And even though our connection seemed to get stronger, once rescue came, what future could there be for a billionaire pharmaceutical executive and a chef? We lived in different worlds and moved in different circles. This island was an aberration, not reality.

Except it had become our reality. And in this reality, Janet was the only person who mattered to me.

“This might sting,” she warned, returning with the antiseptic.

The solution burned, but I didn’t wince. “It’s fine.”

“Stop saying you’re fine when you’re not.” She dabbed at the wound carefully. “It’s okay to admit pain, you know.”

“Not where I come from.”

“Well, you’re not there anymore.” She finished cleaning the cut and began applying a fresh bandage. “Out here, hiding weaknesses just makes you vulnerable.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing? Hiding weakness?”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “Aren’t you?”

The question deserved consideration. Was my drive to fix our situation, to find a way off this island, really about survival? Or was it about maintaining the illusion of control in a situation where I had none?

A crack of thunder split the air, followed immediately by a torrent of rain. The downpour arrived with stunning speed, drenching us within seconds.

“The shelter!” Janet grabbed the first aid kit, and we ran for cover, ducking under the palm frond roof just as lightning illuminated the beach.

Inside, our space felt suddenly smaller and more intimate. Rain drummed against the tarp overhead, creating a cocoon of sound that isolated us from the world outside. We were dry, but barely—water had soaked through our clothes during our brief dash.

Janet pushed wet hair from her face, laughing. “Well, that was sudden.”

“Island weather.” I smiled, watching droplets trace paths down her neck.  
“Unpredictable.”

She reached for a salvaged towel. “Here. You’re soaked.”

“So are you.”

She handed me the towel and found another for herself. We dried off as best we could in the confined space, awkwardly turning away from each other for the illusion of privacy.

I pulled off my wet shirt, wincing as the movement pulled at my injured arm. The rain had intensified, turning our shelter into a drum of constant sound.



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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Let me check that bandage again,” Janet said, turning back to me. She paused, her eyes tracking across my bare chest before quickly returning to my arm. “The rain soaked through it.”

She moved closer in our cramped shelter, her knee brushing mine as she knelt to examine the wound. The slight contact sent heat racing through my body straight to my dick.

“I think it’s finally stopped bleeding,” she said, her voice softer now. “But we should keep it covered until it starts to heal.”

Her fingers traced the edge of the bandage, sending shivers across my skin. When she looked up, our faces were inches apart.

“Janet,” I said, my voice rough.

“Don’t.” She placed a finger against my lips. “Don’t say something logical about why this is a bad idea.”

I took her hand, moving it from my mouth but not releasing it. “I was going to say that I’ve wanted to kiss you since you told me off about making an ‘audition’ dish on the yacht.”

Her eyes widened. “That long?”

“That long.”

A smile curved her lips. “And here I thought billionaires always took what they wanted.”

“Not this billionaire. Not with you.” I released her hand. “But if you want me to keep my distance?—”

She cut me off, closing the space between us and pressing her lips to mine.

The kiss was tentative at first, a question more than a demand.

I answered by pulling her closer, one hand cradling the back of her neck and heat burst through our space.

I dragged her on top of me, her legs straddling on either side of me.

The storm outside faded to background noise as Janet’s mouth opened under mine. Her hands slid up my bare chest to my shoulders, sending electricity through every nerve ending. The towel fell, forgotten, to the floor of our shelter.

I deepened the kiss, tasting her, exploring her with a hunger that surprised us both. A moan mixed with a purr escaped the back of her throat, strengthening the tightness in my dick. With fingers digging into my shoulders, I traced her lips, sucked her tongue, and tightened the grip on her neck.

“Jonathan,” she whispered against my mouth.

My pulse rocked in my neck as I pulled back just enough to look at her, to ensure she wanted this. Her eyes were dark with desire, her breathing as ragged as mine.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

In answer, she kissed me harder this time, with passion that matched the storm raging outside. Her body pressed against mine, her curves fitting perfectly against my harder angles.

I ran my hands down her sides, feeling her shiver beneath my touch. When my fingers found the hem of her dampened shirt, I hesitated, again waiting for permission.

She nodded, breathless, and I slowly lifted the fabric, revealing inches of smooth skin. My hands skimmed her waist, learning her contours and memorizing every reaction.

“Your turn,” she murmured, tugging at my belt.

My heart hammered against my ribs as her fingers worked the buckle. This was happening. Here, in our shelter on a deserted island, with rain pounding overhead and thunder crashing in the distance.

Her hands slipped inside my waistband, and I groaned, capturing her mouth again in a kiss that deepened and sent tingles crashing through me. I rolled her underneath me onto our bed of salvaged blankets, bracing myself above her with my uninjured arm.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, meaning it more than any compliment I’d ever given.

She smiled up at me, her hand cupping my cheek. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

I kissed her again, slower this time, savoring every lick, suck, and taste of her wet mouth.

Janet’s hands explored my back, tracing the muscles that had grown more defined during our time on the island.

When she wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me closer, the world narrowed to just this moment, just us.

My lips traveled from her mouth to her jaw, then lower to the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. She arched beneath me, a soft moan escaping her lips.

“Jonathan,” she whispered, her voice urgent, needy.

I raised my head to look at her, taking in her flushed cheeks and parted lips. At that moment, she was more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen.

“Janet, I want?—”

A tremendous crash interrupted us, the sound of a palm tree falling nearby. We both jolted upright, our survival mode kicking in times one thousand.

“That sounded close,” Janet said, her breathing still uneven.

Another crash, this one accompanied by water suddenly pooling at the edge of our shelter. The storm had intensified, threatening our temporary home.

“The drainage trench,” I said, recognizing the problem immediately. “It’s overflowing.”

Reality intruded with brutal annoyance. If we didn’t act quickly, our shelter and supplies would flood.

Janet was already moving, pulling her shirt back down and running a hand through her tousled hair. “I’ll get the tarp from the supply pile.”

I grabbed my wet shirt, yanking it back on even in discomfort. “I’ll dig the trench

deeper,"I said.

We exchanged a look—regret, desire, and practicality all mixed together. What was building between us would have to wait. Survival came first.

I ducked into the storm to protect our camp with the thoughts of moments ago on a high reel in my mind. For the first time since we'd been stranded, I was grateful for the isolation that had brought us together, even as I recognized the impossibility of what we'd started.

As rain pelted my skin and mud caked my hands, I realized I desperately wanted Janet Banks, but would she want me in the same compacity? I wanted the answer to be yes. I needed it to be.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

M orning light filtered through the palm fronds of our shelter, casting dappled shadows across Jonathan's sleeping face. I'd been awake for nearly an hour, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest, trying to process what had almost happened between us last night.

His features were softer in sleep, and the hard lines of his usually fierce structural face relaxed into something gentler.

A small cut on his chin had scabbed over, his fade was growing out into a wilder untamed look that gave him a devilish air of ruggedly handsomeness, and his full lips were slightly parted.

In this unguarded state, he looked less like the controlling billionaire CEO and more like the man I was rapidly falling for.

I carefully extricated myself from the tangle of salvaged blankets, not wanting to wake him.

The storm had passed, leaving the island smelling fresh and renewed.

Puddles dotted the sand, reflecting the cloudless blue sky above.

I stretched, my muscles aching from our mad dash to save our shelter from flooding last night.

That and the delicious tension that had built between us before the storm interrupted.

Those few moments kept replaying in my mind—the heat of his mouth on mine, the electricity of his hands on my skin, the firmness of his hard body pressing me into the blankets.

We'd come so close to crossing a line that couldn't be uncrossed, and part of me regretted the falling tree that had brought us back to reality.

I went to our freshwater collection system, checking that the storm hadn't damaged it. The containers were overflowing—at least we'd have plenty to drink today. I splashed my face and attempted to tame my wild hair with wet fingers.

“Morning.”

I turned to find Jonathan watching me from the entrance of our shelter. He'd pulled on a relatively clean t-shirt, and his feet were bare. The sight of him like this—disheveled, casual, completely unpretentious—sent a flutter through my chest and tingles to my pussy.

“Morning,” I replied, suddenly self-conscious. “How's the arm?”

He glanced down at the bandage. “Better. You do good work.”

“Thanks, I have a very cooperative patient.” I hesitated, unsure how to navigate the charged air between us. “About last night?”

“We should check the fish traps,” he interrupted, avoiding my eyes. “And I want to salvage more from the yacht before it sinks completely.”

Disappointment washed over me. Was he regretting what happened? “Sure. Let me

just grab my knife.”

We worked in awkward silence, emptying the fish traps that had been generous overnight. Three good-sized fish would make a decent breakfast. As I cleaned them on a flat rock, I stole glances at Jonathan. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he reinforced the stakes holding the traps in place.

“You’re quiet this morning,” I finally said, unable to stand the tension.

He straightened, looking at me directly for the first time since we’d woken. “I’m trying to figure out what to say.”

“About?”

“This.” He gestured between us. “Us. What almost happened.”

I set down my knife. “Do you regret it?”

“No.” The word was immediate, emphatic. “Do you?”

“No.” I matched his certainty.

He took a step toward me, then stopped, running a hand over his growing hair. “This isn’t exactly a normal situation, Janet. We’re trapped on an island, dependent on each other for survival. I don’t want you to feel?—”

“Don’t.” I stood, wiping my hands on my shorts. “Don’t you dare suggest I only kissed you because we’re stranded. Give me more credit than that.”

His eyes widened slightly. “That’s not what I?—”



“I wanted to kiss you on that yacht,” I said, the words tumbling out.

“I wanted to kiss you while standing in that gleaming kitchen. I wanted to kiss you when you complimented my cooking. I wanted to kiss you when you helped me with my head injury. I wanted to kiss you every time you built or fixed something in this godforsaken place.” I stepped closer.

“Being stranded didn’t create those feelings. It just removed the barriers.”

The silence that followed felt endless. Then Jonathan closed the distance between us in two long strides, his hands cupping my face as his mouth dived into mine. This wasn’t the tentative exploration of last night—this was hunger, certainty, and inevitability.

I responded in kind, my arms wrapping around his neck, my body pressing against his. Our mouths meshed, tongues explored, and flavor burst through me in a heated shockwave. I couldn’t get enough. His hands slid down my sides to my hips, pulling me even closer.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard.

“I’ve been fighting this since the moment you walked into my kitchen,” he admitted, his voice rough. “I didn’t hire you just for your culinary skills or your resilience. There was something about you that—” He shook his head. “I couldn’t look away. I needed to know you.”

“And here I thought you were just another entitled billionaire.”

He laughed, the sound warming me from the inside out. “I probably was. Maybe still am.”

“Less entitled now,” I conceded, sliding my fingers along his jawline. “You make a decent fisherman.”

“I will definitely except the praise from Chef Banks.”

His smile faded and a more serious emotion covered his dark eyes as he searched mine. “I don’t know what happens when we’re rescued. Our worlds are very different.”

“I know,” I admitted. “But we’re not being rescued today.”

That seemed to be enough for now. He nodded once, then pulled me back into another kiss that weakened my knees.

“The fish,” I murmured against his lips.

“Right. Priorities.” But he didn’t move away immediately, his forehead resting against mine. “We should probably eat.”

Over the next few days, I decided to build a proper outdoor kitchen because I had had enough of cooking on rocks and makeshift grills.

Getting to know Jonathan was ridiculously funny at times.

To see this beautiful athletic man get completely flustered at times where I excelled tickled me to no end.

But watching his muscles flexed, his nipples hardened, and body spring into action when I needed him for physical endeavors became my favorite pastime.

“I need something more stable than this,” I explained, gesturing to our current

cooking setup. “A real workspace. Maybe even a storage area for the herbs and fruits we’ve gathered.”

Jonathan considered it. “We could use stones from the beach to build a base and some of the larger pieces of driftwood for the surface.”

“That’s excellent.” I high fived him and the sting from our hands colliding rippled through me with joyous tenacity.

We spent the day hauling rocks and selecting the flattest ones for the countertop.

Jonathan’s strength made what would have been backbreaking work for me alone manageable as a team.

By sunset, we had constructed a surprisingly functional cooking station, complete with a stone fire pit beneath to control the heat.

I stood back, hands on my hips, admiring our work. “Not bad for a couple of castaways.”

“It’s practically gourmet,” Jonathan agreed, wrapping his arms around me from behind. His chin rested on top of my head, a perfect fit. “You would have made a good architect in another life.”

“I’ll stick to food, thanks.” I leaned back against his chest. “Speaking of which, I found some wild herbs growing near the freshwater stream. They smell similar to rosemary. I’m thinking they might work with that fish you caught earlier.”

“Lead the way, Chef.”

The kitchen became my domain, a space that felt more like home than anywhere else

on the island. Even stripped of modern conveniences, cooking grounded me. Jonathan watched me work, fascinated by the way I improvised with limited ingredients.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked one evening as I wrapped fish in large leaves before placing them in the fire pit.

“Extreme Chef,” I joked. Then, more seriously: “My dad. He could make a meal out of anything. Military rations, wild plants, whatever was available. He said hunger was the best seasoning.”

“Smart man.”

“He would have liked you.”

Jonathan looked up, surprised. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. He respected competence above all else.” I poked at the fire with a stick. “And you’re nothing if not competent.”

His hand covered mine. “I wish I could have met him.”

The growing intimacy between us wasn’t just physical; it was emotional as well. The next morning, Jonathan was crouched beside a cluster of green leaves, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“Is this one of the herbs you mentioned?” he asked, pointing to a plant with serrated edges.

I knelt beside him, the awareness of his proximity sending warmth through me like a shower.

“Close, but see these tiny hairs on the underside of the leaves?” I brushed my finger along the leaf, then guided his hand to feel the texture.

“The ones we want are completely smooth. These could make you sick.”

His fingers lingered where mine had touched the leaf. “How do you tell the difference so quickly?”

“Practice. And paranoia.” I stood, scanning the area until I spotted what we needed.

“There. Those broad leaves by the fallen log.”

Jonathan followed me over, watching intently as I demonstrated the identifying features. “Smooth undersides, waxy coating on top, and they should smell slightly minty when you crush them.”

He picked a leaf and held it to his nose. “Like that?”

“Perfect.” I couldn’t help smiling at his focused expression. “You’re a fast learner.”

“I have a good teacher.”

Later that afternoon, it was my turn to be the student. Jonathan had spent the morning redesigning our fish traps, and now he was showing me how the new mechanism worked.

“The key is creating a funnel effect,” he explained, his hands demonstrating the water flow. “Fish follow the current in, but the design makes it nearly impossible for them to find their way back out.”

I watched as he positioned stones with mathematical accuracy, creating channels that looked deceptively simple but were clearly engineered for maximum efficiency.

“This is basically calculus with rocks,” I observed.

He laughed. “Everything is calculus if you think about it long enough.” He handed me a flat stone. “Try placing this one where you think it should go.”

I studied the pattern he’d created, then positioned the stone where I thought it belonged. He adjusted it slightly, his hand covering mine to guide the placement.

“Feel how the water moves around it now,” he said, our fingers still touching as water flowed around the stone.

The current eddied and swirled exactly as he’d predicted. “It’s like conducting an orchestra,” I murmured. “Each piece has to work with all the others.”

“Exactly.” His eyes lit up with the same passion I felt when talking about food. “Most people think engineering is about forcing solutions, but it’s really about working with natural forces.”

“Is that what you did with your pharmaceutical work? Work with natural processes instead of against them?”

“That’s the idea.” He released my hand, but the warmth of his touch lingered. “The best medicines enhance what the body already wants to do.”

These teaching moments became our favorite parts of the routine as days passed.

I showed him how to prepare the bitter roots we’d found, soaking, grinding, and seasoning them until they were not just edible but actually pleasant.

He taught me to weave stronger baskets using a technique that distributed weight more evenly.

“Your fingers are too tense,” he observed one afternoon as I struggled with the basket weaving. “It’s like... cooking, actually. You can’t force the ingredients to do what you want.”

I relaxed my grip, letting the palm fronds guide themselves into position. “Better?”

“Much better.” His hand covered mine, adjusting my grip. “See how it flows now?”

The simple contact charged my heart rate, but I forced myself to focus on the weaving pattern. “You’re right. It’s like kneading dough.”

“Everything has a rhythm,” he agreed. “You just have to find it.”

At night, we talked—really talked—in a way I suspected neither of us had with anyone in a long time. Under the canopy of stars, with only the fire and each other for company, we shared childhood memories, professional disappointments, dreams that had been realized, and those still waiting.

“I never wanted to run the company,” he admitted one night with his head in my lap as I ran my fingers over the waves in his hair. “The business side of it, I mean. That was supposed to be temporary.”

“What did you want?”

“To be in the lab, creating, testing, and solving problems.” He smiled up at me. “Not unlike what you do in a kitchen.”

“We’re not so different after all.”

His hand reached up to touch my cheek. “No, we’re not.”

The physical tension between us continued to build, but neither of us rushed it.

There was something precious about the slow exploration—stolen kisses while gathering food, hands lingering during joint tasks, bodies gradually learning each other through casual touches that weren't casual at all.

It was courtship of another kind, in a faraway land where just he and I existed.

This was the thing made of fairytales. The more we remained here, the more I wanted to stay, because the idea of going back to our realities caused a rift in my soul.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

Three weeks into our time on the island, I suggested we explore the western side, which we hadn't thoroughly investigated.

"There might be better shelter options," I said over breakfast. "Or different food sources."

Jonathan nodded. "We should pack some supplies. It might take all day."

We prepared for the journey, filling water containers and packing what food we could spare. The morning was clear and bright as we set off, following the coastline around the curve of the island.

The terrain grew rougher as we progressed, with larger rocks and denser vegetation. Jonathan led the way, occasionally reaching back to help me over challenging sections. His hand in mine felt natural now, a connection I'd grown to rely on.

"Look at this," he said suddenly, stopping to examine a plant with dark green leaves. "Isn't this similar to what you showed me?"

I knelt beside him. "Good eye. It's the same family, but the leaves are broader. Might have a different flavor."

"Should we gather some?"

"Definitely." I pulled out a small pouch I'd fashioned from salvaged fabric. "We can

test it with tonight's dinner."

We continued on, marking our path with small rock piles so we could find our way back. The air grew more humid as we moved inland, and the sound of water became louder.

"Do you hear that?" I asked, pausing to listen.

Jonathan nodded. "Sounds like a waterfall."

We pushed through a particularly dense section of foliage, and suddenly, the vegetation opened up to reveal a breathtaking sight. A waterfall cascaded down a rocky cliff face into a clear pool below, surrounded by lush greenery and vibrant flowers.

"Oh my God," I breathed. "It's beautiful."

Jonathan stood beside me, equally stunned. "I didn't expect this."

The pool was about twenty feet across, fed by the waterfall and draining into a small stream that disappeared into the undergrowth. The water was crystal clear, revealing a sandy bottom.

"Please tell me that's freshwater," I said, already imagining how good it would feel to wash properly after three weeks of makeshift baths.

Jonathan approached the edge, kneeling to cup some water in his hand. He tasted it cautiously. "Fresh. And cold."

I didn't need any more encouragement. I kicked off my shoes and pulled my shirt over my head, leaving me in my shorts and sports bra. "Last one in is cooking

dinner!”

I dove in before he could respond, the shock of the cold water stealing my breath for a moment before giving way to pure bliss. When I surfaced, Jonathan stood at the edge, watching me with an intensity that made my skin tingle even in the cool water.

“Are you coming in or not?” I called.

He pulled his shirt off, his body silhouetted against the sunlight filtering through the trees.

Even after three weeks on the island, the sight of his bare chest made my mouth water.

The definition of his muscles had only increased with our daily physical labor, giving him a demi-god physique that shook me with unholy trembles.

Jonathan dove in skillfully, barely making a splash. When he surfaced next to me, droplets of water clung to his eyelashes and traced paths down his cheeks.

“This is incredible,” he said, swiping water off his face.

“A real shower.” I floated on my back, letting the water support me. “I never thought I’d miss running water so much.”

Jonathan swam closer. “I never thought I’d miss a lot of things. But some things—” his hand grabbed mine under the water “—I didn’t know I needed until I found them.”

I knew he wasn’t talking about the waterfall anymore and I squeezed his hand, my eyes traveling to his as I bit my bottom lip.

We swam for a while, washing away weeks of salt, sweat, and struggle. The pool was deep enough in the center to dive, and we took turns showing off for each other. Jonathan's athletic background was evident in the clean lines of his dives.

Eventually, we made our way to the edge of the pool, where the waterfall crashed down, creating a natural shower. I stood beneath it, letting the water pound against my shoulders and back, working out knots of tension I hadn't even realized were there.

I felt Jonathan's presence before I saw him, the shift in the water revealed his proximity. When I turned, he was inches away, with water streaming down his face and chest. Silently, he brushed wet hair from my cheek, his touch achingly gentle.

"Janet," he said, his voice barely audible over the roar of the waterfall.

I knew what he was asking. "Yes," I answered, rising on my toes to meet his mouth with mine.

The kiss deepened immediately, all the restraint of the past days dissolving in the rush of the water around us.

His hands slid down my back, pulling me against him until there was no space between our bodies.

I could feel every hard plane of his chest against me, the unmistakable evidence of his desire pressing against my stomach.

We moved backward until my back met the smooth rock wall behind the waterfall. The cool stone against my heated skin made me gasp, and Jonathan took advantage, his mouth moving from my lips to my neck.

“I’ve wanted this since the moment I saw you,” he murmured against my skin.  
“Wanted you.”

“Show me,” I murmured, my hands dipping into his muscular back.

His eyes met mine, searching. “Here?”

In answer, I reached for the button of his shorts. “Here. Now.”

That was all the permission he needed. His mouth claimed mine again as his hands explored my body with increasing urgency. Our remaining clothes were discarded, floating, forgotten at the edge of the pool.

In the shadow of the waterfall, my hand slid down his abdomen, gripped his curved dick and slipped back and forth as heat assaulted me.

“Hmmmm...” he growled with his intense gaze locked on mine. My temperature had sky-rocketed, and my mouth and pussy were as wet as the waterfall that plunged over us. I wanted to suck him in, needed to taste the grooves in his rock hard dick when he lifted me, crashing his mouth to mine.

“Mmmmmmm!”

His dick slipped from my grip, and I grabbed his broad shoulders instead. Our bodies slammed together as he sucked my tongue, and when his dick entered me, it was with a long stroking thrust that balled my toes and sent me crawling up the length of him.

“Aaaaaaaaah! Jonathan!”

His arms tightened around my waist, halting my escape and crashing my pussy back to the base of his dick.

“Ah! Shiiiiit!” I screamed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he growled at me.

With as loud as the waterfall was, it didn’t stop his deep drawl from pulling my attention and making me shiver.

“I... I! Ooooooh,” I moaned and bucked, and he held me tight, bucking against my pushing, surging and stroking me deep.

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck!” he cursed. “You’re so damn warm and wet. Shit!”

The water sloshed as we banged together repeatedly. I grew steadier with his rhythm, adding to his beat by bucking back against him.

“Oooooou....”

Jonathan’s tongue slipped back in my mouth and heat swirled around us, tingles cascaded against our skin, and I was drowned in his pleasure.

As if trusting I wouldn’t try to run again, he unclenched his arms from my waist and gripped my ass, spreading my cheeks wide then banging me back and forth.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Jonathan!”

“Janet...”

My hip bucks sped up and I kissed down his jaw and bit into the column of his throat.

“Grrrrghhh...”

He returned the favor, biting my shoulder across my collarbone, sinking his teeth into my neck and fucking me harder with each stroke.

“Oh, fuck, fuck!”

I didn’t want him to stop. Never wanted him to let up and wondered for a second why I waited so long to get a piece of him. But now that we were here, I knew I wanted this over and over, and damn it, nothing or no one would stop me from having him if not him.

“Ooou shit, I can fuck you into the night,” he said.

I panted, closing my legs around him at the ankles. “You promise?”

He bounced me faster, harder, his grips branding my skin with his fingerprints.

“Hell yes,” he moaned.

Jonathan’s mouth dropped to my breasts, and he sucked in one nipple, then the other, flipping his tongue and inhaling my areolas without missing a stroking beat.

I was drenched in desire, drowned in euphoria, and suddenly hoping we could stay like this for as long as possible.

The sun was lowering in the sky, signaling we should head back to our camp soon.

Back in our damp clothes, Jonathan’s expression was more relaxed than I’d ever

seen; the perpetual furrow between his brows smoothed away.

“We should head back,” he said reluctantly. “But we’re definitely coming back here tomorrow.”

I grinned. “Is that an order, Mr. Black?”

He pulled me against him for another kiss. “No. It’s a promise, Ms. Banks.”

We gathered our things and marked the path so we could find it again. The journey back to camp was filled with stolen touches and private smiles, our bodies still humming with the memory of our encounter.

That night, as we lay together in our shelter with Jonathan’s arms wrapped securely around me, I realized we were nothing like we once were. This wasn’t just island fever, or the strange circumstances that had thrown us together.

This was deeper and would follow us back to civilization whenever rescue came. To be honest, I’d lost count on how many times I thought that I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be rescued at all.

“What are you thinking about?” Jonathan asked, his voice drumming against my ear where it rested on his chest.

I considered deflecting and making a joke but opted for truth. “I’m thinking that I’m glad we crashed here.”

His hand paused in its gentle stroking of my hair. “Is that right?”

“Yes.” I propped myself up on one elbow to look at him. “If we hadn’t, I would never have known this version of you. And I like this version very much.”



His expression softened. “I like this version of me, too.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “And I definitely like this version of you. Though I suspect I would have liked any version.”

“Even the one who told you off about your audition demand?”

He laughed. “Especially that one.”

I settled back against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart.

There were still questions and uncertainties about what would happen if we returned to our regular lives.

But for tonight, in this shelter we’d built together on an island far from civilization, those questions could wait.

Janet

Three weeks turned into four on our private island paradise. I'd never imagined being stranded could feel so much like freedom, and each day brought discoveries about the island, Jonathan, and me.

The outdoor kitchen I'd built had become more elaborate with each passing day.

What started as a simple stone surface had evolved into a fully functional cooking station with storage areas for herbs, fruits, and the various tools we'd salvaged or created.

It was nothing like the state-of-the-art kitchen on the yacht, but somehow, I loved it more.

"You're humming," Jonathan said, approaching with an armful of firewood.

I hadn't realized I was making any sound at all. "Force of habit. I always hum when I'm comfortable in a kitchen."

He set the wood down and wrapped his arms around me from behind, his chest warm against my back. "You never hummed on the yacht."

"I wasn't comfortable there," I admitted. "There was too much pressure to be perfect."

His lips brushed the sensitive spot just below my ear. "You are perfect."

“Now, who’s full of it?” I laughed, turning in his arms to face him. “I’m sweaty, my hair is a disaster, and I’m pretty sure these shorts have seen better days.”

Jonathan’s hands slid to my hips, his fingers slipping under the hem of my shirt to touch my belly. “Perfect,” he repeated, his voice dropping to that tone that never failed to make my insides melt.

I rose on my toes to kiss him, still marveling at how quickly this had become natural between us. His mouth opened under mine, and for a moment, I forgot all about the fish I was supposed to be preparing for lunch.

A rustling in the nearby bushes broke us apart. We both tensed, scanning the tree line. After weeks, we’d encountered various island wildlife—mostly birds and small reptiles—but nothing dangerous.

“It’s probably just a bird,” I said.

Jonathan didn’t look convinced. He moved toward the sound, putting himself between me and whatever might emerge.

A flash of vibrant color darted from the bushes—a parrot, its bright plumage an igniting color against the green foliage. It perched on a nearby branch, studying us with curious eyes.

“Well, hello there,” I said softly.

The bird tilted its head, then let out a squawk that sounded almost like “hello” before flying off.

“Did that bird just—” Jonathan began.

“Talk? I think it did.” I laughed. “Maybe we’re not the first humans to end up here.”

“Or someone’s pet escaped from a passing boat.” Jonathan returned to my side. “Either way, at least we know there’s intelligent life besides us.”

“That’s debatable,” I teased, poking him in the ribs. “You did insist on going into that yacht during high tide yesterday.”

“And I found more rope, which we needed.” His hands returned to my waist. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“From what?”

“From this.” He pulled me close again, his mouth dropping into mine and sucking in my tongue. We’d quickly learned each other’s bodies over the past week, discovering what made the other sigh, moan, or beg for more.

I melted against him, my arms winding around his neck. When we finally broke apart, we were both panting.

“The fish,” I murmured against his lips.

“Can wait.” His hands slid lower, cupping my bottom and lifting me with ease. I wrapped my arms around his neck, legs around his waist, and he pulled my shorts down and pushed his hard dick inside me.

“Ooooh... my Jonathan...” I moaned, my head falling back and rolling side to side.

“My Janet,” he murmured, stroking me deep and hard over and over.

Our bodies stung as we banged together, and pleasure rippled through me in a

heatwave.

“Ooou... I can never get enough,” I purred.

“Never do,” he drawled, keeping his rhythm steady. “Never do...”

Jonathan grabbed my hips and dug deep, rotating his hips then popping my pussy fast then slow. He was driving me wild enough but every time he switched his rotation, slowed, then sped up, it pulled my orgasm even lower.

“I’m going to come!”

Passion drove our desire as he pummeled me while sucking my tongue and I drenched his shaft.

“Ooooooh!”

“Janet... sweetheart, my lover...” he moaned. “I can’t stop. I can’t....”

“Don’t,” I said, even though my pussy was tingling like toes that had fell asleep.

Jonathan pulled out of me, perched me on a flat stone, turned me, and bent me over my stone countertop. I couldn’t protest and didn’t dare to, so when he entered me from behind, I practically crawled on top of my kitchen.

“Aht, aht... come here.”

He grabbed my arms, pulled them behind me and crossed my wrists and held them together in one hand while he lifted my leg with the other and pumped into me.

“Oh! Oh! Ooooooh Jonathan!”

My pleasure ignited more than I thought it could.

Being in the open having sex was new for me.

Something I'd only explored with him. But knowing no one was around made this type of sexual freedom liberating in a way that made me want to make this a thing between us regardless if we were rescued or not.

My ass stung as our bodies collided and I sprung off his hard dick like a bouncing yo-yo.

"Aaaah! Jonathan!"

"Yes, baby, yes! Throw that ass back at me," he growled.

"Oooou shit!"

I did as I was told, meeting his fervent plunges as I pushed my ass back.

"Fuck!" he yelled.

I came again and didn't get to warn him. "Shit, shit, shit!" My pussy palpitated like a heartbeat and he gripped me tighter and fucked me harder.

"Jaaaaaah!"

Our bodies burned from the force of our sex and just when I thought I would become delirious, he pulled out and shot warm come on my ass and up my back.

"Ooooooh..."

I wiggled from his grasp and turned, squatted, and opened my mouth, attempting to taste the orgasm he gave up as he was still emptying himself.

My mouth closed over his curved dick, and I moaned, closing my eyes.

“Shit, fuck!” His hand dug into my scalp and gripped my hair, and I locked my jaws and pulled the remaining nut down my throat.

“Mmmmm.” When I opened my eyes, he stared at me like an uncaged animal.

“You’re such a bad fuckin’ girl.”

I smiled and licked my lips. “And I could use some of you as my seasoning.”

His gaze darkened. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Why?”

“We’ll never make it back to the food.”

I laughed, stood to my feet, removed my clothes, and ran to the freshwater pit before I made him make do on his threat.

“Never in a million years did I think we’d be here like this. Now we’re...”

“Now we’re what?” He shifted to look at me with curiosity in his expression.

I hesitated. What were we? Lovers, certainly. Friends, definitely. But no label seemed adequate for what had developed between us.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “What would you call this?”

He leaned in and bit my bottom lip. “Something I never expected to find. Especially not here.”

“That’s not really an answer.”

“Maybe I don’t have one.” He pulled me closer. “Does it need a name? Can’t we just be us?”

I wanted to push, to define whatever this was, but the vulnerability in his eyes stopped me. This undefined territory was uncomfortable for a man who had controlled every aspect of his life.

“Yeah,” I said instead. “We can just be us.”

We finally returned to the abandoned fish, which had to be discarded. Instead, Jonathan suggested checking the traps he’d set on the other side of the island.

“We need to collect more of those herbs you found near the waterfall anyway,” he said.

We made our way across the island, following the path we’d marked.

The journey had become easier with each trip, and our bodies adjusted to the terrain.

Jonathan held branches aside for me, his hand finding mine at difficult crossings.

These small acts of consideration had become second nature to him.

At the waterfall, we took a detour for a swim, unable to resist the clear water. What started as cooling off quickly evolved into more, our bodies coming together under the cascade again.



“We’re never going to get anything done at this rate,” I laughed afterward, floating on my back in the pool.

Jonathan swam alongside me. “Is that a complaint?”

“Not even close.”

I spotted something floating in the sky beyond the trees as we dressed and prepared to continue to the traps.

“Jonathan, look!” I pointed to a small white object moving across the distant blue expanse.

He shaded his eyes, squinting. “Is that?—”

“A plane!” We both shouted at once.

We scrambled to the highest point, waving frantically and shouting, though we knew it was too far away to hear us. The plane continued its path, not deviating.

“Damn it,” Jonathan muttered as it disappeared from view. “We need a better signal. Something they can see from a distance.”

For the first time in days, I saw the return of his focused determination—the man who solved problems through sheer force of will. It was familiar and somehow distant, a reminder of the world beyond our island.

“The signal fire,” I said. “We need to make it bigger and more visible.”

He nodded. “And we should have something ready to create smoke—green branches, wet leaves. It will draw attention.”

We abandoned our original plan and returned to camp, our earlier playfulness replaced by a renewed sense of purpose. The plane reminded us that we were lost, not on vacation.

Jonathan spent the rest of the day gathering materials for a more substantial signal, his expression set in concentration. I watched him working, sweat glistening on his bare back as he hauled branches and positioned them for maximum visibility.

“You’re going to work yourself to exhaustion,” I said, bringing him water.

He took the leaf cup from me, drinking deeply. “We can’t miss another chance. We need to be ready.”

I touched his arm. “We will be. But killing yourself won’t help.”

His shoulders slumped slightly. “I know. It’s just—seeing that plane made it real again. We need to get off this island.”

The words stung more than they should have. “Right.”

He caught my tone immediately, turning to face me. “Janet, that’s not?—”

“No, you’re right,” I interrupted. “This isn’t real life. It’s a pause button.”

Jonathan brushed a strand of hair from my face. “That’s not what I meant. These weeks with you have been more real than anything I’ve experienced in years.”

“But?”

“But we can’t live on coconuts and fish forever.” He pulled me against him. “Think of all we could do with actual ingredients. I want to see you in a real kitchen again,

creating those dishes you've described. I want to take you places, show you things beyond this beach."

I hadn't expected that. "You've been thinking about... after?"

"Haven't you?"

I'd deliberately avoided it, afraid of what returning to civilization would mean for us. "I thought maybe this was just island fever for you. Something that would end once we were rescued."

His expression darkened. "Is that what you think of me? That I'd discard you once we're back?"

"No," I said quickly. "But our worlds are so different, Jonathan. You run a pharmaceutical empire. I'm a chef with a failed restaurant and barely enough savings to start over."

"And?"

"And billionaires don't date chefs they pulled off reality cooking shows."

He actually laughed, which wasn't the reaction I expected. "Says who? Some rulebook I don't know about?" His hands cupped my face. "I don't give a damn about what billionaires supposedly do. I care about you. About us."

The conviction in his voice made my throat tight. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He kissed me softly. "So, let's get off this island so I can prove it to you."

After that, we worked together to reinforce the signal fire and establish a system to

generate smoke quickly if needed. By sunset, we were both exhausted but satisfied with our preparations.

That night, as we lay in our shelter, watching the stars through gaps in the palm fronds, I allowed myself to imagine a future beyond the island—a future with Jonathan—not as employer and employee, but as equals sharing something real.

It was a dangerous indulgence, this hope. But as his arms tightened around me in sleep, I couldn't help believing it might be possible.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

“ I see something!”

Jonathan’s shout jolted me from where I’d been gathering shellfish at the edge of the tide, and weeks on the island had made me an expert at spotting the telltale signs of clams buried in the wet sand.

I straightened, shielding my eyes against the morning sun. “Where?”

He pointed toward the horizon. “There. Moving this way.”

At first, I saw nothing but the endless blue meeting the sky. Then I caught it—a dark speck against the water, gradually growing larger.

“Is it a boat?” My heart began to race.

“I think so.” Jonathan’s voice held a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. “Get the signal fire ready. I’ll grab the flares we salvaged.”

We sprang into action, our movements trained from the drills we’d run since spotting the plane. I piled green branches onto our signal fire, then struck the flint against steel to create a spark. The dry tinder caught immediately, and thick smoke billowed into the clear sky within minutes.

Jonathan returned with the emergency flares we’d retrieved from the yacht. “Not too soon,” he cautioned. “We need to make sure they’re looking this way.”

We watched, barely breathing, as the speck grew into a definite shape—a fishing boat, small but sturdy, heading on a course that would bring it within sight of our smoke.

“They must see it,” I said, anxiety making my voice higher than usual. “They have to.”

Jonathan’s hand squeezed mine tightly. “They will.”

But the boat continued on its path without changing direction. They hadn’t spotted us.

“Now,” Jonathan said, raising the flare gun.

The red streak shot high into the sky, bursting in a brilliant crimson cascade. We waited, our bodies tense.

The boat kept moving.

“No,” I whispered, disbelief turning to desperation. “No, no, no.”

Jonathan fired a second flare, his jaw set in determination. This time, the boat’s course shifted slightly, then more deliberately.

“They saw us!” I grabbed Jonathan’s arm. “They’re turning this way!”

The next thirty minutes were the longest of my life. We paced the beach, waving whenever the boat came clearly into view. Gradually, it grew from a small shape to a distinct vessel—an old fishing trawler with peeling blue paint.

When it was close enough for us to make out figures on deck, tears sprang to my eyes. After weeks of isolation, seeing other human beings seemed almost surreal.

“Hello!” A voice called through a megaphone. “We see you! Stay where you are!”

Jonathan let out a laugh that was half relief, half disbelief. He turned to me, his eyes bright with emotion. “We’re getting off this island.”

My stomach clenched with conflicting feelings—joy at rescue, fear of what came next. “Yeah.”

His expression softened as he read my thoughts. He pulled me close, his voice low in my ear. “This changes nothing between us. Remember that.”

I nodded as a smaller boat detached from the fishing vessel and headed toward shore. Two men rowed steadily, their faces curious as they approached.

“Ahoy!” the older man called, his weathered face creased in a friendly smile. “Looks like you folks could use a ride.”

Jonathan helped them beach the small boat. “You have no idea how glad we are to see you.”

“Shipwrecked?” The younger man asked, eyeing what remained of the yacht offshore.

“A storm hit us weeks ago,” Jonathan explained. “We lost contact with our crew.”

The men exchanged looks. “You might be the folks they’ve been searching for,” the older one said. “There was a mayday about a luxury yacht going down. The Coast Guard’s been looking.”

Hope surged through me. “Did they find survivors? Our crew?”

“I heard they picked up some folks in a life raft about a week after the storm. Don’t know details.” He gestured to the radio on their boat. “Captain can call it in when we return to the main vessel.”

We gathered what little we wanted to take—my knife roll, Jonathan’s salvaged satellite phone, and a few personal items we’d managed to save. Looking at our camp, the shelter we’d built, and the kitchen I’d created, I felt an unexpected pang of sadness.

“Seems silly to be attached to this place,” I said quietly to Jonathan as we prepared to leave. “After wanting to escape for so long.”

He understood immediately. “It’s not silly. This became our home.” His hand brushed mine. “But we’re taking the important parts with us.”

The journey to the fishing boat took only minutes, but it felt like crossing into another world. As we climbed aboard, the Captain—a burly man with a salt-and-pepper beard—greeted us warmly.

“Orlando Martin,” he introduced himself. “Lucky we spotted your flare. We don’t usually come this far north.”

“Jonathan Black,” Jonathan replied, shaking his hand. “And this is Janet Banks. We can’t thank you enough.”

Recognition flashed across the Captain’s face. “Black? The pharmaceutical guy?” He let out a low whistle. “They’ve been looking for you, sir. Your company’s had search planes out for weeks.”

“We spotted a plane a few days ago,” I said. “It didn’t see us.”



“Let’s get you both some food and clean clothes,” Martin said. “Then we’ll radio your position. We should be able to get a helicopter out here by tomorrow.”

The crew provided us with too large but blissfully clean clothes and a hot meal that made my taste buds explode, considering the fish we’d eaten nonstop on the island.

“This is incredible,” I said to the ship’s cook, a friendly man named Eduardo. “The seasoning is perfect.”

He beamed at the compliment. “Just salt and pepper, Miss. Nothing fancy on this boat.”

“This is a five-star meal.”

While we ate, Captain Martin contacted the mainland. His expression was somber when he returned to the small kitchen where we sat.

“I got through to the Coast Guard,” he said. “They’ve confirmed your crew was picked up. Seven survivors in a life raft.”

Jonathan straightened. “Seven? We had eight crew members plus us.”

Martin nodded. “The Captain is still missing. They called off the official search last week.”

The joy of our rescue was instantly dimmed. Jonathan’s face hardened. “Called it off? Why?”

“Standard procedure after so much time, sir. Limited resources.”

Jonathan stood abruptly. “I need to use your radio.”

“Of course.”

I followed them to the bridge, where Jonathan made a series of calls—first to the Coast Guard, then to what I gathered was his company headquarters. His voice grew increasingly authoritative with each conversation, the island castaway transforming back into the powerful CEO right before my eyes.

“I don’t care what the protocol is,” he said firmly to someone on the other end. “I’m authorizing a private search effective immediately with full resources.” He glanced at me. “Yes, we’re both fine. We’ll need transport from these coordinates tomorrow.”

When he finally put down the radio, some of the tension had left his shoulders.

“My helicopter will meet us tomorrow morning,” he explained. “I’ve arranged for the search for Captain Reynolds to continue. My company will cover all the costs.”

The resolve in his voice reminded me of our first meeting—a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. But now, instead of finding it off-putting, I admired his tenacity.

“You don’t think he’s gone, do you?” I asked quietly when we were alone in the small cabin they’d given us for the night.

Jonathan sat on the edge of the narrow bunk. “I don’t know. But I’m not giving up on him without being absolutely certain.”

I sat beside him, our shoulders touching. “He’s lucky to have you fighting for him.”

“It’s the least I can do.” He ran a hand over his head. “If I’d listened to him about the storm, none of this would’ve happened.”

“You can’t change the past,” I reminded him. “But what you’re doing now matters.”

He turned to look at me, his eyes searching mine. “Will you stay with me? Through this search, I mean. I know you probably want to get back to your life, but?—”

“Yes.” I didn’t hesitate. “I’ll stay.”

Relief washed over his features. “Thank you.” He pulled me into an embrace that felt naturally domestic.

That night, we slept in a real bed for the first time in a month. Though the cabin was tiny and the mattress thin, it felt luxurious after our shelter of palm fronds and salvaged fabric.

As Jonathan’s breathing deepened into sleep beside me, I stared at the metal ceiling, trying to process everything that had happened. Tomorrow would bring us back to civilization and the real world with all its complications and inequalities.

Jonathan had insisted nothing would change between us, but I couldn’t silence the doubtful voice in my head. We had been equals on the island, dependent on each other for survival. Back in his world of corporate power and wealth, would that equality survive?

I turned to study his face in the dim light. Even in sleep, his features were strong, but I’d come to recognize a vulnerability. The month on the island had changed him, stripping away some of the arrogance and control that had defined him when we met.

It may have changed me, too. The chef who boarded his yacht had been defensive, determined to prove herself. The woman lying beside him now had proven more to herself than she’d ever imagined possible.

Whatever tomorrow brought, we would face it together. That much, at least, I could believe in.

Jonathan

The helicopter descended toward the fishing trawler, its rotors churning the calm sea into froth.

Janet stood beside me on the deck, her hand gripping mine tightly. The wind from the rotors whipped her hair around her face as she stared at the approaching aircraft.

“Your chariot awaits,” I said into her ear, trying to lighten the tension I felt in her body.

She managed a small smile. “I’ve never been in a helicopter before.”

“It’s just like a really loud, shaky elevator,” I assured her, though I knew her anxiety went beyond fear of flying.

This helicopter represented our return to reality—a reality where she was uncertain about our future.

I understood her hesitation, but I was determined to show her nothing between us would change.

Captain Martin approached us as the helicopter hovered, preparing to land on the cleared deck space. “It’s been an honor, Mr. Black.”

I shook his hand firmly. “The honor is mine, Captain. You saved our lives. I won’t forget that.”

He nodded, then turned to Janet. “Mrs. Black, safe travels.”

Neither of us corrected his assumption. Janet thanked him, her cheeks darkening slightly at the misunderstanding.

The helicopter landed, and a man in a corporate uniform jumped out, hurrying toward us with a ducked head.

“Mr. Black! Thank God you’re alive, sir.” He had to shout over the noise. “We’ve been searching for weeks.”

“Greg,” I recognized my head of security. “It’s good to see you.” I gestured to Janet. “This is Janet Banks. She’s coming with us.”

If Greg was surprised, he didn’t show it. He nodded and helped us aboard. As the helicopter lifted off, I watched the fishing boat grow smaller below us. Janet’s hand remained in mine, her grip tightening as we rose higher.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded, though the color had faded from her face. “Just remembering why I prefer my feet on solid ground.”

I pulled her closer, my arm around her shoulders. “It’s a short flight. We’ll be on the mainland in less than an hour.”

The cabin was equipped with headsets to allow conversation over the rotor noise. Greg handed each of us one, then leaned forward once we were settled.

“Sir, I need to brief you on the situation,” he said, his voice coming through the headphones. “Your company has been in a holding pattern since your disappearance.

The board appointed an interim CEO, but major decisions have been delayed pending your return.”

“And the search for Captain Reynolds?”

“Per your instructions, we’ve contracted a private search and rescue team. They’re mobilizing now.”

I nodded. “That’s good. I want daily updates and accommodations for Ms. Banks as well. She’ll be staying with me during the search operation.”

Greg’s eyes flickered briefly to Janet, then back to me. “Of course, sir. Your penthouse in San Juan has been prepared.”

“San Juan?” Janet asked through the headset.

“It’s closest to the search area,” I explained. “I have a place there for business trips.”

The flight passed quickly as Greg continued his briefing, covering details of company operations, the crew’s rescue, and media interest in our disappearance. Janet remained silent beside me, taking it all in with wide eyes.

“There will be press when we land,” Greg warned. “Your disappearance has been major news. Everyone wants the story of how you survived.”

I felt Janet stiffen beside me. “No press,” I said firmly. “We’ll issue a statement later. For now, I want a direct route to the residence and arrange for a doctor to meet us there.”

“Already done, sir.”

I turned to Janet. “Is there anyone you need to contact? Family?”

She shook her head. “Just my sister, Melanie. She’s been managing my business affairs.”

“Give Greg her number. He’ll make sure she’s informed.”

As we approached San Juan, the city sprawled below us—roads, buildings, people. After a month of isolation, the sight was overwhelming. I glanced at Janet, seeing the same mixture of awe and apprehension reflected in her eyes.

“It’s a lot,” I acknowledged softly.

“Yeah.” She squeezed my hand. “But we’re together.”

The helicopter landed on the roof of a sleek, high-rise building. A small group waited—medical staff and what appeared to be my household employees. Greg exited first, then helped Janet out. I followed, feeling strange standing on concrete after weeks of sand and earth.

“Mr. Black,” the doctor stepped forward immediately. “I’m Dr. Morales. I’d like to examine you and Ms. Banks as soon as possible.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “But privately, please. We’ve been through enough without an audience.”

The next few hours were a whirlwind of medical examinations, showers in actual bathrooms with hot water, and the strange experience of putting on formal clothes again.

I found Janet in the guest suite, standing awkwardly in new clothes that had been



delivered—simple but high-quality items that fit her surprisingly well.

“My assistant has good taste,” I said from the doorway.

She turned, a small smile playing on her lips. “And apparently, a good eye for sizes.” She tugged at the sleeve of the soft sweater. “This feels weird.”

“The clothes?”

“All of it.” She gestured around the luxurious room. “This is your life. Private helicopters, penthouse suites, staff waiting to fulfill your every need.”

I moved closer. “Parts of it, yes. But it’s not who I am.”

“Hmmm...” Her eyes held mine.

“You disagree?”

“The moment that helicopter landed, you transformed back into CEO mode. Orders, arrangements, efficiency.”

“That’s my job,” I said carefully. “Not my identity.”

She seemed to consider this. “I guess we’ll see.”

A knock banged at the door. Greg stood there with a tablet. “Sir, the search team is assembled and ready for your instructions. And there’s an update on the recovered crew members.”

“I’ll be right there.” I turned back to Janet. “Will you join us?”

She nodded. “I want to help however I can.”

The search operation headquarters had been set up in my home office. Maps of the Caribbean Sea covered the walls, marked with search grids and ocean currents. The lead coordinator—a wrinkled man named Hector with a military posture—waited with his team.

“Mr. Black, Ms. Banks,” he greeted us. “I understand you want to continue the search for Captain Reynolds.”

“That’s right,” I confirmed. “Whatever it takes.”

Hector nodded. “I should be honest with you, sir. The chances of finding him alive are extremely slim.”

“I understand the odds,” I replied, keeping my voice steady. “But we need to be certain.”

The meeting lasted over an hour as Hector outlined the search plan, incorporating data from the storm, ocean currents, and the location where we’d been found. Janet remained by my side, asking insightful questions about survival possibilities that impressed even the seasoned search experts.

“Your girlfriend knows her stuff,” Hector said after she’d suggested checking a particular chain of small islands based on the prevailing currents.

I didn’t correct his assumption about our relationship. “She’s the reason we survived on that island. If anyone can think like someone trying to stay alive out there, it’s Janet.”

When the meeting concluded, Greg stayed behind with another update. “Sir, about

the crew—they've been notified of your rescue. They're all still recovering at the Mercy Hospital in San Juan."

"I want to see them," I said immediately.

"Of course. I can arrange a visit for tomorrow."

"Today," I insisted. "They need to know we're doing everything possible to find Captain Reynolds."

Janet and I walked into the hospital an hour later, with Greg and another security officer who kept the press at bay. The seven surviving crew members had been moved to a private wing, where they were recovering from their ordeal.

The first person we saw was Sandra, my former assistant. She burst into tears at the sight of us. "Mr. Black! Ms. Banks! You're alive!"

The reunion was emotional for everyone. The crew had been through hell—a week drifting in the life raft before a cargo ship spotted them, followed by dehydration treatment and recovery. They'd assumed we'd perished when the yacht hit the rocks.

"We saw you both go overboard," Elliot, the first mate, explained. "The Captain ordered us to the life raft. He was going back for you when the yacht shifted. A wave took him from the deck before he could reach you."

"He tried to save us," Janet said softly beside me.

Guilt pressed down on me. If I'd listened to Captain Reynolds about the storm in the first place, none of this would have happened.

"We're going to find him," I told the crew firmly. "I've hired the best search team

available.”

“The authorities said it was hopeless,” Sandra said.

“They’re wrong,” I replied. “And even if they’re not, he deserves our best effort.”

As we left the hospital, Janet was quieter than usual. In the car, she finally spoke. “You blame yourself, don’t you?”

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “Of course I do. It was my decision to maintain course and overlook the warnings.”

“The captain knew the risks of his job.”

“That doesn’t absolve me.”

She placed her hand on mine. “No. But finding him won’t erase what happened, Jonathan.”

“I know that,” I said. “But I can’t give up on him. I won’t.”

Her expression softened. “That’s one of the things I love about you.”

It was the first time she had used that particular term. My heart fluttered.

“You love me?” I asked quietly.

A blush crept up her cheeks, but she held my gaze. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

I leaned across the seat, cupping her face in my hands. “The only problem is that you beat me to saying it first.”

Her smile was like a sunrise after a storm. “Always have to be in control, don’t you?”

“Not anymore,” I murmured, bringing my lips to hers. “Not with you. I love you, too, Janet.”

She moaned when I captured her lips, a sound that brought comfort through my soul and removed the guilt I felt moments before.

It became obvious day by day that the strange course of our path had a purpose, and I wanted to see that purpose through with her for as long as she would allow.

That evening, the search operation was officially launched. Three boats and a surveillance aircraft began methodically covering the search grid Hector had established. I stood on the penthouse balcony, watching the boats head out to sea, their lights diminishing into the darkness.

Janet joined me, wrapping her arms around my waist from behind. “They’ll find him,” she said. “Or they’ll find answers.”

I turned to face her. “How are you handling all this? It’s a lot to process in one day.”

“I’m taking it one moment at a time.” She glanced around at the luxurious penthouse. “Though I must admit, your version of normal will take some getting used to.”

“This isn’t normal for me either,” I admitted. “Being here with you. Finding someone who sees me, not what I can provide or what I represent.”

She reached up to touch my face, her fingers tracing my jawline. “I see you, Jonathan Black. The island you and CEO you—they’re the same person. The core of you hasn’t changed.”

I covered her hand with mine. “Stay with me tonight?”

“I thought that was the plan.”

“No, I mean—” I gestured toward the master suite. “With me. Not in the guest room.”

Her smile was answered enough. “I think that can be arranged.”

Later, as we lay together in the most comfortable bed either of us had experienced in a month, Janet’s head resting on my chest, I felt a sense of peace even with the uncertainty surrounding Captain Reynolds. Whatever happened, I knew I’d found something precious in the most unlikely circumstances.

I stroked her hair and murmured, “I had a revelation.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Sometimes you have to lose everything to find what really matters.”

She propped herself up on one elbow to look at me. “Pretty profound for a guy who spent all day issuing orders and making arrangements.”

“I’m a multi-tasker,” I said.

Her laugh was the most melodic beautiful sound I’d heard all day. “That you are.” She settled back against me. “One of those tasks being a fisherman.”

“And a builder of slightly lopsided shelters.”

“It wasn’t lopsided. It had character.”

We fell asleep like that, trading memories of our island life, holding onto the connection we'd forged while navigating this new reality together.

Janet

The search for Captain Reynolds consumed Jonathan's days.

Each morning began with a briefing from Hector's team, followed by strategy adjustments based on the findings from the previous day.

Jonathan absorbed every detail, asked insightful questions, and often spent hours poring over maps and weather data himself.

I wouldn't have expected anything less from him. The man I'd met on the yacht—focused, determined, unwilling to accept failure—was fully present in these moments. But there was a difference now. The arrogance had been replaced by humility, the rigid control by collaborative leadership.

"You should have seen him before the board meeting yesterday," Sandra told me over coffee. She'd been released from the hospital and had immediately resumed her duties as Jonathan's assistant. "He actually asked for input from the junior executives. Nearly gave old Mr. Drummond a heart attack."

I smiled, picturing the scene. "Island life changes your perspective."

"Whatever happened out there, it did him good." She gave me a knowing look. "You both seem... different."

I focused on my coffee cup, unsure how much to share. Jonathan and I hadn't explicitly discussed how public to make our relationship. "Near-death experiences



have that effect.”

Sandra wasn’t fooled, but she didn’t press. “The catering team sent the menu options for tonight’s dinner with the search coordinators. Would you like to review them?”

“I’ll do better than that,” I said. “I’ll cook.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t have to do that, Janet. You’re a guest here.”

“I’m going stir-crazy with nothing to do while Jonathan’s working. Please, let me cook. It’s what I love.”

Sandra hesitated, then nodded. “I’ll tell the staff to give you full access to the kitchen. Just let me know what ingredients you’ll need.”

That was how I found myself in Jonathan’s state-of-the-art kitchen that afternoon, surrounded by the finest ingredients money could buy. After creating meals from island resources with primitive tools, the professional-grade equipment felt almost intimidating.

I ran my fingers over the smooth countertops, inspecting the knife collection that rivaled my own. Everything was pristine, barely used. Jonathan mentioned that he rarely ate at home and preferred restaurants or simple meals when working late.

“This is going to change,” I murmured to myself, rolling up my sleeves.

I lost myself in the familiar rhythms of cooking, crafting a menu that showcased local ingredients while incorporating techniques I’d perfected in my restaurant.

The stress of the past days—the helicopter ride, the media attention, the unfamiliar luxury—melted away as I chopped, seared, and seasoned.

When Jonathan returned from his meetings, the kitchen was filled with aromas that made his eyes widen as he entered.

“What’s happening here?” he asked, a smile spreading across his face.

I gestured to the array of dishes taking shape. “Dinner. I hope you don’t mind, but I commandeered your kitchen.”

“Mind?” He moved behind me, his arms circling my waist as he peered over my shoulder at the pan I was stirring. “This is the best thing I’ve smelled in weeks.”

“Better than fish cooked over an open fire on the beach?”

“Well, maybe it’s a tie.” His lips brushed my neck. “Need any help?”

I leaned back against him. “From the man who couldn’t identify a ripe mango? I think I’ve got it covered.”

“Hey, I learned eventually,” he protested, but his laugh rumbled against my back.

“Why don’t you go change? The search team will be here in an hour.”

He turned me in his arms. “Have I told you today that you’re incredible?”

“Not in those exact words.”

“You’re incredible.” He kissed me softly, then deepened it when I responded, his hands sliding up my back.

I reluctantly pulled away. “If you keep that up, dinner’s going to burn.”

He sighed dramatically. “We can’t have that. I’ll behave... for now.”

The dinner was a success beyond my expectations.

Hector and his team—hardened professionals who’d seen everything—became almost giddy over the Caribbean-inspired dishes I’d prepared.

The tension that had defined the search discussions eased as they enjoyed the meal, creating space for more creative thinking.

“So you were a chef on Mr. Black’s yacht?” Hector asked between bites.

“For about five days before we crashed,” I confirmed. “Before that, I owned a restaurant in Seattle.”

“She’s being modest,” Jonathan interjected. “Janet won Extreme Chef and ran one of Seattle’s most innovative kitchens before a lease issue forced closure.”

I glanced at him, surprised he knew these details about my career. He’d clearly done his research before hiring me.

“Well, their loss is our gain,” Hector declared, helping himself to seconds. “This might be the best meal I’ve had in years.”

After dinner, the conversation inevitably returned to the search. Hector spread maps across the dining table, pointing out the areas they’d covered and what remained.

“Based on ocean currents and the storm path, we’ve established this as our highest probability zone,” he explained, circling a region with his finger. “But it’s vast. Even with three boats, it could take weeks to cover thoroughly.”

Jonathan studied the map. “What if we add more resources? More boats, aircraft?”

“It would speed things up, but at significantly increased cost,” Hector warned. “We’re already looking at an operation that will run into the millions.”

“Money isn’t the issue,” Jonathan said firmly. “Time is. Every day reduces the chances of finding Captain Reynolds alive.”

I watched him, noting the determination in his jaw and the unwavering focus in his eyes. This wasn’t about guilt anymore—or at least, not just about guilt. It was about doing what was right, regardless of cost or conventional wisdom.

“Double the boats,” Jonathan decided. “And I want a second aircraft. We’ll run twenty-four-hour operations, rotating crews.”

Hector nodded, clearly impressed. “We’ll make it happen, sir.”

After the team left, Jonathan and I stood on the balcony, looking out at the night sea where the search continued under floodlights.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said, his arm around my shoulders. “It made a difference. The team needed that boost.”

“Food brings people together,” I replied. “Creates a space for conversation and connection.”

He was quiet for a moment. “That’s what your restaurant did, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just about the food.”

“No.” I smiled, touched that he understood. “It was about creating experiences, moments that people would remember.”

“I want to help you reopen,” he said suddenly. “When this is over. Whatever you need—capital, location scouting, business advice.”

I stiffened slightly. “I don’t need charity, Jonathan.”

“It’s not charity.” He turned to face me. “It’s an investment in something I believe in. Something I’ve experienced firsthand.” His voice softened. “But only if you want it. On your terms.”

I studied his face, looking for any sign of condescension or control. There was none—just earnest support, a deeper vulnerability that made my heart flutter.

“My terms?” I asked.

“Completely. Your vision, your menu, your space.” He smiled. “Though I hope I get a permanent reservation.”

The tension eased from my shoulders. “I might be able to arrange that.” Silence lingered between us. “You’ve changed,” I said softly.

His hand grabbed mine. “How so?”

“The Jonathan Black who demanded an audition on that yacht would never have offered help without strings attached.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “I thought I knew what mattered before. Success, control, expanding the company.” His fingers threaded through mine. “The island clarified things.”

“And now?”

“Now I know that all the success in the world means nothing if you don’t have someone to share it with. Someone who sees you—really sees you.”

“I see you.”

“I know you do.” He pulled me closer. “That’s why I’m falling in love with you.”

The words sent warmth spreading through my chest. “Falling?”

“Fallen,” he amended. “Completely.”

I stared at him. “I’m in love with you, too.”

I kissed him, pouring everything I felt into it.

“Let me take you to bed,” he murmured against my mouth.

“You never have to ask again.”

He swept me up in his arms and I was inundated with pleasure the moment he entered me with earth-shattering strokes.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

Ten days into the search, they found a piece of the yacht's hull floating nearly a hundred miles from where we'd been rescued. It was an unremarkable section of fiberglass and metal, but its discovery brought hope through the operation.

"This confirms we're searching in the right area," Hector told us during the morning briefing. "The currents carried it exactly as our models predicted."

Jonathan studied the photographs, his brows dipped as his forehead creased. "What about the emergency raft? Did Captain Reynolds have access to one?"

"The primary raft was deployed with the crew," Hector reminded him. "But there was a secondary emergency raft stored near the bridge. If he managed to reach it..."

I watched the calculations happening behind Jonathan's eyes—the time elapsed, the odds of survival, the vastness of the search area still to cover.

The board of directors had begun making noise about the cost of the operation, suggesting it had become a recovery mission rather than a rescue.

Jonathan had shut them down immediately.

"We keep searching," he said, now his voice leaving no room for debate. "Concentrate resources in this quadrant based on the hull fragment."

For the past week, I'd been managing the support side of the operation, cooking for

the search teams, and coordinating with the families of the recovered crew members. This had given me purpose and kept me from dwelling on the uncertain future awaiting Jonathan and me once this was over.

I'd also begun sketching plans for a new restaurant—tentative ideas for menus, layouts, and concepts. Jonathan had noticed the drawings on the desk in the guest room I used as an office but hadn't commented, respecting my need to work through these ideas independently.

After the briefing, I found him in his office, reviewing reports from his company. The pharmaceutical business hadn't stopped during our absence, and he worked double time to catch up while continuing to lead the search efforts.

"You should eat something," I said from the doorway.

He glanced up, the tired lines around his eyes softening when he saw me. "Is it that late already?"

"It's past two. You missed lunch."

"I got caught up in these quarterly projections." He rubbed his eyes. "The interim CEO made some questionable decisions while I was gone."

I moved behind his chair, my hands working at the knots in his shoulders. "Anything serious?"

"Nothing irreparable. But he shelved the program to expand access to our antibiotics in developing countries. It was my priority project."

I continued massaging his tense muscles. "Can you restart it?"



“Already did. First thing this morning.” He leaned back into my touch. “That feels amazing.”

“You’re carrying all your stress here.” I pressed my thumbs into a particularly tight spot, making him groan. “You need to rest.”

“I will. When we find Reynolds.”

“And if that takes another month?”

His shoulders tensed again under my hands. “It won’t.”

I moved around to perch on the edge of his desk, facing him. “Jonathan, I need to ask you something, and I want an honest answer.”

Wariness crept into his expression. “Alright.”

“Is this still about guilt, or is it something more?”

He was quiet for a long moment, considering. “It started as guilt,” he admitted finally. “But now... It’s about doing what’s right. What I should have done from the beginning—listen to the experts, make decisions based on what’s best for everyone, not just what I want.”

I reached for his hand. “You’ve learned that lesson. Everyone can see it.”

“But at what cost? Reynolds might have lost his life because I was too stubborn to change course.”

“Or he might still be out there, and you’re the only one who hasn’t given up on him.” I squeezed his fingers. “That matters, Jonathan.”

Greg appeared in the doorway, his expression unusually animated. “Sir, there’s a call you need to take. Team Alpha just reported a sighting.”

Jonathan was on his feet instantly. “What kind of sighting?”

“Debris field with what appears to be a partially inflated raft. And they think they saw movement.”

My heart jumped to my throat as Jonathan grabbed the phone, activating the speaker so I could hear.

“This is Black. Talk to me.”

The voice that came through was distorted by the wind and the boat’s engine. “Sir, we’ve spotted what appears to be an emergency raft about two miles east of our position. It’s partially submerged, but we can see someone on it.”

“Alive?” Jonathan’s fist tightened around the phone.

“Unknown at this distance. We’re approaching now.”

The next fifteen minutes were the longest of my life. Jonathan paced the office, periodically demanding updates while the boat maneuvered closer to the raft. I sat frozen, hardly daring to breathe.

Finally, the radio crackled. “We have visual confirmation. One male, Caucasian, severely dehydrated but conscious. Matches the description of Captain Reynolds.”

Jonathan’s eyes closed briefly, his exhale shaky. “Get him on board immediately. Full medical protocol. I want a helicopter for medical evacuation as soon as he’s stable.”

“Already in progress, sir.”

Jonathan put down the phone and turned to me, his expression a mix of disbelief and overwhelming relief. “They found him. He’s alive,” he said.

I stood on unsteady legs and crossed to him. “You did it. You never gave up.”

He pulled me in an embrace so tight, it nearly crushed the breath from my lungs. “We did it,” he corrected, his voice was rough with emotion.

In the next few hours, Reynolds was airlifted directly to the hospital, where a medical team was waiting. Jonathan insisted on being there when he arrived, and I went with him, unwilling to let him face this moment alone.

The Captain was barely recognizable—his skin burned and blistered from sun exposure, his body emaciated from weeks with minimal food and water. But his eyes were alert as they wheeled him in, scanning the room until they landed on Jonathan.

“Black,” he croaked, his voice a dry whisper. “Knew you’d...look for me.”

Jonathan moved to his side, his composure nearly breaking. “I should have listened to you about the storm. I’m sorry.”

Reynolds managed a weak shake of his head. “It’s part of the job.” His cracked lips attempted a smile. “You both...made it.”

“Thanks to Janet,” Jonathan said, glancing at me. “She kept us alive on that island.”

The doctors intervened then, insisting they needed to stabilize the Captain. As they wheeled him away, Jonathan remained rooted to the spot, watching until the doors closed behind them.

“He doesn’t blame me,” he said quietly.

“Of course, he doesn’t. He’s a professional who understands the risks of his position.” I took his hand. “Just like you need to understand that accidents happen, even to people who are used to controlling everything.”

A small smile touched his lips. “You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

The search team gathered at the penthouse that night for an impromptu celebration. The relief was palpable—not just because Reynolds had been found alive against all odds but because the uncertainty had finally lifted.

I watched Jonathan move through the gathering, thanking each team member personally and making sure they understood how vital their contribution had been. This was another side of him I’d come to appreciate—the leader who recognized and valued every person’s role, not just those at the top.

Hector raised his glass in a toast. “To Mr. Black, who refused to accept impossible odds.”

“And to Captain Reynolds,” Jonathan added. “The toughest son of a bitch on the seven seas.”

“Hear! Hear!”

After the guests had left, Jonathan and I stood on the balcony, the night breeze cool against our skin. The search boats were returning to port, and their mission was complete.

“What happens now?” I asked, voicing the question that had been hovering between us for days.

Jonathan’s arm tightened around my waist. “What do you want to happen?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I’m serious.” He turned to face me. “What do you want, Janet? Not what you think is realistic or practical, but what you truly want.”

I took a deep breath. “I want to reopen my restaurant. On my terms, creating the food I believe in.”

He nodded. “And personally?”

The sincerity in his eyes gave me courage. “I want to be with you. But not as an accessory or a charity case. As a partner.”

“You would never be a charity case,” he said firmly. “What happened between us on that island wasn’t because we were stranded with no other options. It was real. It is real.”

“But our lives are so different, Jonathan.”

“So? I don’t want to be with someone exactly like me. That would be boring as hell.” He took my hands in his. “I want you, stubborn, talented, passionate you. The woman who tells me when I’m being an ass and forces me to see beyond my perspective.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “I do that a lot, don’t I?”

“And I need it.” His expression grew serious. “I love you, Janet. Island or mainland,

rich or broke, CEO or chef—none of that matters. What we found together, that connection, that’s what I care about.”

The earnestness in his voice made my doubts recede. “I love you, too.”

Jonathan’s hands framed my face, his eyes locked with mine. “Then let’s build something together - without rushing or following anyone else’s timeline. Just us, figuring it out day by day.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m committed to you. To us.” His voice deepened with conviction. “I want to be part of your restaurant’s rebirth. I want you by my side when I launch the foundation for medical access. I want Sunday mornings cooking breakfast together and falling asleep to the sound of your breathing.”

My heart swelled. “You’ve given this some thought.”

“Every day since we washed up on that shore.” His thumb traced my lower lip. “I don’t know what the future holds exactly, but I know I want to face it with you. No pressure, no timetable—just the promise that I’m all in.”

I pressed my palm against his chest, feeling his strong heartbeat. “I’m all in, too.” The city lights twinkled below us, a constellation of beauty wrapping the night sky.

“We’ll figure it out,” I said, leaning into his embrace. “Day by day.” His lips brushed my temple.

“Starting tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” he said, a smile warming his voice, “I’m taking you to see a restaurant space I think you’ll love.”

I pulled back to look at him. “You’ve been scouting locations?”

“Just options. The final decision is all yours.”

“You really are serious about this. About us.”

“More than I’ve ever been about anything.” Jonathan pulled me close again, his certainty wrapping around me like a promise.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am*

Janet

Six months later

I stood in the kitchen of “Salvaged,” my new restaurant in downtown Seattle. The grand opening was just hours away, and even in the chaos of final preparations, I paused to take it all in.

The space was everything I’d dreamed of—intimate but not cramped, with an open kitchen that allowed diners to watch the cooking process. Natural materials dominated the design: reclaimed wood, stone, and metal that echoed our island experience without being kitschy.

“The flowers just arrived,” Melanie said, bustling in with a clipboard. My sister had unexpectedly taken on the role of a restaurant manager. “And the mayor confirmed he’ll be here for the ribbon cutting.”

“Of course, he will,” I muttered. “Nothing attracts politicians like free food and photo ops.”

Melanie ignored my cynicism. “The press list is full, too. Everyone wants to see what the ‘Castaway Chef’ has created.”

I winced at the nickname the media had bestowed on me.

The story of our island survival had captured the public’s imagination, propelling me to a level of fame I’d never anticipated or wanted.



Jonathan helped me navigate the attention, teaching me how to maintain privacy while leveraging the interest to promote the restaurant.

“Where is Jonathan, anyway?” Melanie asked, checking items off her list. “I haven’t seen him all morning.”

“He’s in a board meeting. He’ll be here by five.” I adjusted the arrangement of spices at my station, ensuring everything was within easy reach. “How’s the staff doing?”

“Nervous but ready. You’ve trained them well.”

I’d assembled a team of talented young chefs, many from disadvantaged backgrounds who wouldn’t usually have access to high-end restaurant opportunities. It was one of many ways Jonathan and I had found to combine our different worlds and resources.

My phone buzzed with a text from Jonathan: “This meeting is running long. I’ll be there by five thirty. I love you.”

I typed back a quick acknowledgment, trying to ignore the flutter of anxiety. This opening meant everything to me—a second chance at the dream I’d almost abandoned and the first real test of whether Jonathan and I could maintain our connection amid the pressures of our respective careers.

The past six months had been a whirlwind. After Reynolds’ dramatic rescue and our return to civilization, we’d split our time between San Juan and Seattle, merging our lives in expected and surprising ways.

Jonathan had been true to his word about the restaurant being my vision. He’d provided capital and business connections but stayed out of creative decisions. When I’d chosen this location—more modest than what he’d initially suggested—he’d supported me without question.

“This one feels right,” I’d explained, walking through the space that would become Salvaged. “It’s about the food and the experience, not luxury for its own sake.”

He’d understood immediately. “It’s authentic. Like you.”

Our relationship had deepened, and the challenges of his corporate responsibilities and my restaurant development hadn’t interfered.

We’d established routines that kept us connected—cooking together on Sundays, holding regular video calls when travel separated us, and having honest discussions about expectations and boundaries.

Not that it had been perfect. Jonathan’s controlling tendencies occasionally resurfaced, especially when he was stressed about work.

My stubborn independence sometimes pushed him away when I should have let him in.

But unlike my past relationships, we faced these issues directly, learning to navigate our different approaches to life.

“Chef?” My sous chef’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “The fish delivery is here, but they’ve brought sea bass instead of the snapper we ordered.”

I switched immediately into problem-solving mode. “Let me see it.”

The sea bass was exceptional—firm, fresh, with clear eyes and bright gills. “We’ll adjust. Tell Marco to prep it with the ginger-scallion sauce instead of the citrus marinade.”

What I loved most about cooking was the constant adaptation and creativity that

resulted from unexpected challenges. It reminded me of our island days, when we would make delicious meals from whatever resources we had available.

By five o'clock, the restaurant was transformed. Tables were set with simple but elegant place settings, staff were in their positions, and the bar was stocked with curated wines and spirits. Everything was ready except for one crucial element.

"He'll be here," Melanie reassured me, noting my frequent glances at the door.

"I know." And I did know. Jonathan had never let me down when it mattered. But this opening represented more than just a restaurant launch—it was the public debut of our combined lives, the first step toward our future together.

At five-twenty-five, the door opened, and Jonathan walked in. He'd come straight from his meeting, still in his impeccable suit, but his eyes sought mine immediately, his smile warming me from across the room.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, crossing to me. "The board members and their endless questions stalled me."

"You're right on time." I reached up to straighten his tie, a gesture that had become habitual between us. "Nervous?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" His hands settled on my waist. "It's your night, after all."

"Our night," I corrected. "I wouldn't be here without you."

"You would have found your way back eventually." His faith in me never wavered. "I just expedited the process."

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” I teased, some of my tension easing in his presence.

He laughed, then grew serious. “I have something for you. An opening night gift.”

“Jonathan, you didn’t need to?—”

“I know I didn’t need to. I wanted to.” He pulled a small package from his pocket.

Inside was a chef’s knife—not just any knife, but a perfect replica of the santoku my father had given me, which had been lost when the yacht sank.

My eyes watered and emotion hit me in my gut. “How did you find one of these?”

“I had a custom bladesmith recreate it based on your description.” He looked uncertain for the first time. “Is it close?”

I turned the knife in my hand, feeling its perfect balance, its weight like an extension of my arm. The tears dropped, one at a time. “It’s exactly right. Thank you.”

He brushed away the tears. “No crying in the kitchen, Chef. You have a restaurant to open.”

I tossed my arms around him and kissed him heavily.

The following hours kept me busy as a bee: the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the arrival of the first guests, and the rhythmic dance of service as orders flowed in and plates went out. I lost myself in the work, and the familiar pressure was challenging and comforting.

From my position at the expo station, I could see Jonathan charming investors and

critics alike, occasionally catching my eye across the busy restaurant with a private smile that reminded me of quiet moments on our island.

The menu I'd created told our story without being obvious—dishes inspired by Caribbean flavors but refined through classical technique, simple ingredients elevated through careful preparation.

Many incorporated elements we'd discovered during our island time—herbs similar to those we'd foraged, cooking methods we'd developed out of necessity.

The signature dish—"Island Catch"—featured locally sourced fish prepared with techniques we'd perfected when cooking over open fires. Served with foraged greens and root vegetables, it captured the essence of our survival experience while transforming it into something elegant and accessible.

By the end of the service, it was clear that we had achieved success. The critics were making appreciative noises, the regular diners were already booking return visits, and the staff was riding high on the success of a flawless opening night.

As the last guests departed, Jonathan found me overseeing the final cleanup in the kitchen.

"Chef Banks," he said formally, though his eyes danced with pride. "I believe congratulations are in order."

I wiped my hands with a towel. "We pulled it off."

"You pulled it off," he corrected. "This is all you, Janet."

The staff gathered around as Jonathan opened a bottle of champagne, pouring glasses for everyone. He raised his in a toast.

“To Salvaged, and to the extraordinary woman who created it. May this be the first of many successful nights.”

“To Salvaged!” They all shouted. “Congratulations Janet!”

Applause erupted and my tears were back as I glanced at them one by one, and in the midst of it all – Jonathan, now my rock, made my heart warm all the more.

Janet

“I have something for you, too.”

Two days later and I was still riding high on the successful launch of Salvaged. Yet still, I'd been thinking about the gift I got Jonathan ever since he'd given me the replica of my father's knife.

I handed Jonathan a small wooden box. “Open it,” I urged.

He flipped the latch, and the lid sprang open. A smile lit up his face, his eyes growing sensual and warm.

Inside was a compass—antique brass with a hand-carved wooden case. The compass face was pristine, the needle true, but the inscription inside the lid made him suck in a sharp breath: “Found when lost. J & J.”

“It's beautiful,” he said, running his thumb over the engraving.

“I thought about all the ways our paths shouldn't have crossed—all the coincidences and decisions that somehow led us to that island together.” I squeezed his hand. “Even when we were lost, we found something true.”

His eyes met mine, holding a depth of emotion that still took my breath away. “I don't need to know where I'm going anymore. Just who I'm going with.”

His lips met mine in a passionate kiss and shot heat straight to my pussy.

“I’ve got something for you too.”

My eyes widened and I drew back. “Something else?”

“Well... for us.”

“You didn’t buy a house, did you? Because I would want to have input on that!”

Dark laughter poured from him, transforming his handsome face into a bliss of happiness.

“No, Chef. Follow me.”

He grabbed my hand, and we were off.

The salt spray kissed my face as the boat cut through the turquoise water.

Beside me, Jonathan’s powerful frame relaxed against the cushioned seat, his arm draped casually around my shoulders.

The sky stretched endlessly blue above us, so similar to the day we’d first set out on his yacht a year ago.

“Nervous?” he asked, his voice low enough that only I could hear.

I turned to face him, squinting against the Caribbean sun. “Why would I be nervous?”

“Being on these waters might bring up some difficult memories.”

I considered this, watching the horizon where a small green shape was gradually forming—our island. “It wasn’t all difficult,” I reminded him, sliding my hand over his thigh. “Some parts were... illuminating.”



His laugh rumbled deep in his chest. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

Captain Reynolds called out from the helm, interrupting our private moment. “We’ll be anchoring in about twenty minutes! The water’s too shallow for a closer approach.”

I felt a flutter of anticipation in my stomach. A year ago, to the day, this island had been our prison and our salvation. Now we were returning by choice, a pilgrimage neither of us had been able to resist.

So much had changed in that year. Salvaged had exceeded all expectations, after opening.

Jonathan had restructured his pharmaceutical company to focus more on research and accessibility programs, stepping back from daily operations to pursue the lab work he’d always preferred.

And we—well, we had built something between us that defied easy definition.

Not marriage, not yet. We’d both agreed that rushing into formal commitment would dishonor the trust we’d built. Instead, we’d grown together naturally, merging our lives at a pace that respected our independence and connection.

“There it is,” Jonathan said softly, pointing toward the now visible island. “Looks smaller than I remember.”

“Everything seems bigger when you’re trapped on it,” I replied, scanning the familiar coastline.

The boat slowed as Captain Reynolds guided us toward the same beach we’d washed ashore. The sand gleamed golden in the midday sun, the palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze. From this vantage point, it looked like a postcard paradise rather than

the site of our desperate struggle for survival.

“We’ll wait here,” Reynolds called as he cut the engine. “Take your time.”

Jonathan helped me into the small dinghy, his hands steady on my waist. As we rowed toward shore, memories flooded back—the terror of the storm, the disorientation of waking on unknown sand, the gradual realization that we might never leave.

Our boat scraped against the sand, and Jonathan jumped out to pull it ashore. The warmth of the beach seeped through my sandals as I stepped onto the island once more.

“It’s just like I remember,” I said, turning in a slow circle. “And completely different.”

Jonathan nodded, his eyes tracking across the tree line. “Our shelter was there,” he said, pointing to a clearing that vegetation had since reclaimed. “And your kitchen was over there.”

We walked together, tracing the geography of our past. The fresh-water pool still bubbled clear and sweet. The rocks where we’d built our signal fire remained blackened. And the waterfall—I felt heat rise to my cheeks just thinking about it.

“Want to check if the water’s still cold?” Jonathan asked, catching my expression with a knowing smile.

“Later, maybe.” I took his hand, pulling him toward the far end of the beach. “First, I want to see something.”

We made our way to the western tip of the island, where the rocky outcropping created a natural platform overlooking the sea. This had been my favorite spot during

our time here—a place where the ocean’s vastness seemed less threatening and more awe-inspiring.

“I used to come here to think,” I told him as we climbed the familiar path. “When the uncertainty got overwhelming.”

“You never told me that,” Jonathan said, his brow furrowing slightly.

“You had enough to worry about, trying to salvage that radio,” I teased, referencing his obsessive attempts to restore communication.

When we reached the top, I stopped, holding out my arms to the endless horizon. “This view saved me sometimes. It reminded me that there was a world beyond our little patch of sand.”

Jonathan moved behind me, his chest solid against my back, his arms encircling my waist. “And now?”

“Now I know there’s a world out there,” I said, leaning into his embrace. “But sometimes all I need is right here.”

We stood in comfortable silence, watching seabirds wheel above the water. In the distance, our boat bobbed gently.

“I’ve been thinking,” Jonathan said finally, his chin resting on the top of my head.

“Dangerous.”

He chuckled. “About what we should do with this place.”

I turned in his arms. “What do you mean?”

“I bought it,” he said.

My mouth fell open. “You bought an island? Just like that?”

“It wasn’t easy. It took months of research to figure out which government had jurisdiction, then more months of negotiations.” He shrugged as if purchasing private islands was a typical Tuesday activity. “But yes, I bought it.”

“Why?” I managed to ask, still processing.

Jonathan’s dark eyes held mine. “Because this is where we began. Where we learned who we could be together. I didn’t want it turned into a resort or stripped of resources.”

I glanced around, seeing our little island with new eyes. “So what now? Private getaway for the billionaire and the chef?”

“That’s one option.” His expression grew more serious. “But I was thinking something more meaningful.”

He guided me back down to the beach, where he’d left a small pack. He pulled architectural renderings from it and spread them on a flat rock.

“A retreat center,” he explained as I examined the drawings. “It would be for survivors of trauma and loss, people who need to reconnect with themselves the way we did here.”

The plans showed sustainable structures integrated with the natural environment—healing spaces that honored the island’s raw beauty while providing essential comforts.

“We’d bring in therapists, wilderness experts, chefs like you who understand how

food connects to healing.” His voice grew animated as he described his vision. “People would come for a few weeks at a time at no cost. The foundation would cover everything.”

“The foundation?”

“The Salvaged Foundation.” He watched my face carefully. “Named after your restaurant. After what we found here.”

I traced the drawings with my fingertips, imagining this wild place transformed into a sanctuary for others. “It’s beautiful, Jonathan.”

“You don’t think it’s too controlling? Me buying an island without consulting you?”

I laughed. “Oh, it’s definitely controlling. But it’s also generous and thoughtful.” I met his gaze. “And very you.”

He relaxed visibly. “I want you involved in every aspect of the design, especially the culinary program. Only if you want to be, of course.”

“Of course, I want to be.” I stepped closer, resting my hands on his chest. “Cooking saved me when my restaurant failed. Then cooking for you saved me again here. I know what healing can happen in a kitchen.”

Jonathan pulled me against him, his heart beating strongly under my palms. “So you’re not mad about the island surprise?”

“I’m getting used to your grand gestures,” I admitted. “Though you might want to tone it down. Most boyfriends just bring flowers.”

He laughed. “Noted. Though technically, there are flowers on the island.”

We spent the afternoon exploring our old spots, marveling at how nature had reclaimed much of what we'd built.

The shelter had collapsed entirely, vines and creepers winding through its remains.

The paths we'd worn had disappeared under new growth.

Only the stone portions of my makeshift kitchen remained relatively intact.

As the sun descended toward the horizon, we made our way to the waterfall—the site of our first true surrender to each other. The pool remained as clear and inviting as I remembered, though without the desperate need for bathing that had accompanied our previous visits.

“Care for a swim?” Jonathan asked, already pulling his shirt over his head.

I didn't need to be asked twice. The heat of the day and our hike around the island had left me longing for the cool water. We stripped down and dove in, the shock of cold as bracing as it had been a year ago.

“Still as good as I remember,” I gasped, pushing wet hair from my face.

Jonathan swam to me, water sluicing down his powerful shoulders. “Better,” he corrected, gathering me against him. “No imminent danger of starvation or dehydration to distract us.”

His kiss tasted of salt and peppermint, his body familiar yet exciting against mine. Under the waterfall's cascade, he lifted me, and I embraced his undertaking in a moan following the pressure of his pleasure.