



Sanctuary

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Category: Horror

Description: From the #1 Bestselling Author of the Detective Eve Bennet crime series, comes a wild animal thriller that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

In the shadow of a fervent religious sect, fifteen-year-old Misty Garners refusal to marry her churchs pastor leads to a harrowing abduction from her own bed, casting her into the uncertain embrace of the Bridge Home School for Girls. Miles away, Simon, the heart and soul behind the Savage Cat Sanctuaries operations, harbors a deep-seated anger against the sanctuaries stringent rules. His unparalleled bond with Indra, a majestic Bengal tiger, fuels his daring plan to grant freedom to the captive big cats amidst an impending hurricane.

As the storms fury converges with Mistys desperate bid for freedom alongside her newfound ally, Paige, their escape to an isolated island intersects with Simons audacious gambit. Unbeknownst to them, their sanctuary becomes their peril, where the line between predator and prey blurs.

This novel weaves a tale of resilience, unlikely alliances, and the raw instincts for survival against the backdrop of natures untamable force, challenging the very essence of what it means to be wild and free.

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Home, Misty

The scream strangled in Misty's throat as she fought to breathe. Her eyes popped open, trying to focus on the nightmare happening in her bedroom. Terror and confusion filled her sleepy thoughts. She stared into the eyes of a strange man standing above her, his hand covering her nose and mouth. She exploded in a twist of arms and legs, fighting for her life and that of her family. Her elbow connected with the man's face, and his loud grunt filled the room.

Another man grabbed her legs, holding them to the bed as Misty grew lightheaded from the lack of oxygen. She froze, a chilling numbness setting in as she tried to decipher what was happening.

The man lifted his hand from her mouth and repositioned himself to carry the upper part of her body as the other man took her lower half. They deftly transported her through the house, out the front door, to a waiting vehicle without saying a word.

She stayed quiet because she hadn't seen her parents or her little brother. She hoped whatever was happening would not carry over to her family and they would be safe.

The men flung her into the back of an SUV parked outside her parents' suburban home. One of the men sat in the back with her. Misty scooted as far away as she could and immediately tried the opposite door handle. It didn't budge. The man ignored Misty's struggle for freedom until her tears turned to screams. The open-handed slap was so sudden that it surprised her more than it hurt, but she got the hint, and her new fear of physical abuse suppressed the next scream.

Misty closed her eyes, hoping the nightmare would end. When she dared peek, she still sat in the back of the vehicle, wearing only her cotton nightgown and panties. No, terrified didn't quite cover how she felt.

She looked around the back of the SUV for a weapon, anything she could use to protect herself. There was nothing. The man who slapped her didn't appear to have a gun. He didn't look at her, but she studied him. If she survived, she could give the police his description. Had they hurt her family, her little brother? She suppressed another scream, lifted her legs, and pulled the nightgown over them. She huddled against the locked door, too terrified to even look out the window, the only sound her frantic gulps for breath between sobs. The two men didn't care that she could barely breathe or that she wasn't wearing a seatbelt. She knew they planned to kill her.

It took over an hour before she found the courage to ask a question. "Where are you taking me?" She waited. They never answered.

Her terror settled into a cold ball in the pit of her stomach as the vehicle continued on its course. Sometime later, her eyes drifted closed, and exhaustion won the battle. She jolted awake when the SUV made a sharp turn, throwing her against the door. Light shone through the window, and moss-covered dense trees lined the road on both sides. The vehicle turned left down another road. Low hanging branches scraped the hood of the car. An eerie feeling settled over Misty. The sensation intensified when large wrought-iron gates swung open and the SUV continued down a narrow drive. On the final sweeping turn, Misty saw an old decrepit three-story mansion that did nothing to diminish her fear.

The once white stucco was yellowed and chipped, the outer walls and building unkept. The steeply pitched roof covered in dark slate tiles had a few patches showing the effects of age and weather. On the side she could see, a narrow fire escape zigzagging up the building, its metal steps and railings showing signs of rust and wear. Creeping vines and moss adorned the building giving it an overgrown

appearance. The foreboding picture in front of her inspired nothing but fear.

The front door opened and a middle-aged woman, wearing a white lab coat over a plain black dress, stepped outside. She stood on the porch and glared at the vehicle, her stern expression accentuated by deep lines etched into her face. Her gray hair was pulled tightly back into a bun, her high forehead prominent. Her lips remained pursed as she took the steps and headed toward the vehicle.

“Slide over,” the man in the backseat said, and beckoned Misty to move across the seat so she could exit on his side. Should she? Now was not the time to rebel so she stayed silent and moved over. The man stepped back and the woman leaned in. Misty still had a small bit of hope that the woman would help her. Unfortunately the firm press of her nearly white lips discouraged her optimism.

“You will remain silent,” she all but spat. “Follow me.” Her voice was as disturbing as she was. The woman turned away and walked toward the front door.

The man said nothing and didn’t really seem to care if Misty got out or not. Stay with the men who kidnapped her or follow the creepy old woman? Creepy old woman won. Misty scrambled out of the SUV and shuffled after her, keeping her arms at her sides so the nightgown didn’t ride up past her thighs.

She walked through a heavy wooden door with intricate carvings, flanked by narrow, dark windows on either side. It was like stepping back in time. The grand foyer may have once exuded elegance but was now in need of heavy repair. The large, worn marble tiles on the floor were broken and chipped. An ornate chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The walls were lined with dark wood paneling at the bottom and faded wallpaper with large roses splashed across it in patterned horror. To the right, a sweeping staircase with a carved balustrade curved upward. The cool air held a slight mustiness but every surface was spotless with no sign of dust or cobwebs.

"You will close the door behind you," the woman said from a few feet away.

Misty stopped where she was and, regardless of her fear, she decided enough was enough. "Where am I, and why am I here?" She put every last bit of her fifteen-year-old arrogance into the question.

The woman had begun climbing the stairs, but she suddenly swept around, her hand going to a thick cane hanging by a cord from her waist, partially hidden by the lab coat. She lifted the cane and struck. Misty didn't turn in time and it connected with her face, neck, and the upper part of her chest.

"Do not speak." The woman again turned her back on Misty, who had her palm over the red heat burning her cheek. Stunned by the sudden violence, Misty followed, her knees knocking together as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

They climbed the stairs to the third level. There were no decorations on the dimly lit stairwell other than the ugly wallpaper. Nothing gave away where she'd been taken. The woman continued down a long corridor to the second-to-last closed door on the left. Using a key from a keyring also attached to her waist, she unlocked the door and opened it wide. It was a bathroom, and Misty was extremely grateful because she needed to use the toilet.

"Remove your clothes and place them on the counter."

"What?" Misty asked in complete astonishment.

"I do not repeat myself," the woman's lip curled up, and it wasn't a good look on her. "This is your only warning. If you do not do as you are told, you will be beaten."

Beaten? Misty couldn't have heard her correctly. The woman's hand went to the cane. Misty stepped into the bathroom and looked around before turning back to the

woman who stood glaring at her.

"I do not have anything but panties under my nightgown."

"Remove it all, or your delay will have consequences."

The words pumped ice-cold terror through Misty's veins. The church taught her that her body was sacred. She had never undressed in front of anyone but her mother, and that had been years before. Her shaking fingers inched down to the bottom of the nightgown, and she bent slightly before releasing it and straightening.

"I can't," she said. She expected the strike but hadn't anticipated that they wouldn't stop.

Misty cried out and covered her face and neck with her arms. Each ensuing hit landed on her shoulders until she went to her knees, the pain more than she could take. The woman reached down and began tearing the nightgown from her body between strikes. A blow connected with her fingers, and Misty thought they were broken. She did everything she could to hold onto the nightgown, but the woman eventually won.

Long fingers dug into her hair and jerked her head back.

"Stand up." The woman's eyes held a satisfied expression that stunned Misty. The crazy old lady enjoyed hurting her.

Misty cried out as the cane came down again. The fire spread clear to her toes. Against the fear and pain, she made it to her hands and knees while snot dripped from her nose onto the floor. Her shaking legs didn't want to hold her, so she grabbed the counter and stood as straight as she was able. The blows stopped but the woman's heavy breathing filled the small room.

"Remove the underwear, now."

Shame mixed with pain. Misty slipped the garment down her legs and kicked it off her feet, one arm covering her breasts and her other hand going between her legs.

"Get into the shower," the mean voice said. "Wash your hair and your body. Clothes will be provided when you finish. You have four minutes."

"I need to go pee," Misty pleaded between sobs.

"It's part of your shower time," the woman stated, her booted feet planted a foot apart, unmoving.

Misty stared at her, knowing the woman would watch her use the toilet, which was more humiliation than she could handle. She pushed aside the shower curtain and turned on the water, stepping inside before it warmed. She couldn't stop the stream of urine that ran down the drain.

"Three minutes."

The freezing water didn't grow warmer. Misty could barely see through her tears but she quickly grabbed the liquid soap, lathered herself, rinsed, and did the same to her hair while shivering so hard it was difficult to hold the bottle. Misty peeked from behind the shower curtain. The woman stood with a stack of clothing in her arms. Misty's clothes were missing.

"Shut the water off and get out," she instructed, handing her a towel.

Misty dried herself, trying to stay covered while she did it. The woman pointed at the clothes which she had moved to the counter. It was a beige, unadorned long dress with a high neckline and long sleeves straight out of history from a hundred years

before. Misty pulled the shapeless garment, heavier than it looked, over her head. The dress ended midway between her knees and ankles. She donned the white underwear quickly. There had been no bra, but her breasts were small and she'd never worn one.

"Follow me," the woman said again and walked away. She used a key to unlock another door. As soon as it opened, she stepped back and nodded at Misty to precede her.

The room was spartan, with only a bed covered by a white sheet. No other furniture, although there was a door on the side that might be a closet.

"You do not have permission to speak," the woman said behind her. "Talking is a privilege here. You also have no bedding. Everything must be earned, other than your clothes and shoes, which are in the closet. If you behave in a manner that cannot be controlled by simple means, your clothing will be removed, and you will stay locked in this room until you comply. Someone will come for you when it's time to begin your orientation."

Misty simply stared, too afraid to ask a question. Tears slowly slipped down her cheeks.

"You are at the Bridge Home School for Girls," the woman continued. "You will stay here until your behavior is that of a proper Christian woman and not that of a spoiled child guided by Satan. This can be a rewarding time in your life where you learn your place to be a wife and mother, or it can be a time of misery. Either way, you will be a suitable young woman when you leave. Your parents have paid dearly for the privilege of sending you here, and they have prayed extensively." She turned and walked from the room, locking Misty inside.

She stared at the closed door in horror.

Her parents had done this to her.

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Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon's overly large head went back so far he stumbled and righted himself as he looked at the distant ocean sky. He scratched his graying beard and contemplated the gathering clouds. Simon liked storms. Jerry, his boss, did not. The cats Simon cared for liked them too, but that was because the large storms came with something special attached. From Simon's experience, these clouds would fizzle out before they hit land. His knees were stiff but the ache was bearable and it also told him that a full hurricane wouldn't materialize.

He lowered his head and moved to the first pen. Carla and Tibby, female lions about two years old, were brought in together a week before, stared at him with distrust. The bucket of food he carried consisted of goat and chicken meat this time. It was cheaper than beef, and they raised chickens on the island, so that was cheaper still. Savage Sanctuary Island cost a lot of money to run and Jerry was always yelling at Simon about food expenses and vet bills. Simon knew they couldn't lower the amount of food provided to the large cats or they would become more aggressive along with impacting their overall health.

He approached the pen and Carla's teeth bared while she made a low grumbling noise of displeasure. Tibby, the smaller of the two, huddled in the back of the cage, her fangs showing though she didn't make a sound. Simon didn't really know their story, and he didn't know them. This was important because he tried to build rapport with all the cats and mostly he was successful. For these two, he would need to wait and see.

Carla came forward when the food was offered but Tibby stayed where she was.

Simon backed away so they were more comfortable, though their eyes stayed on him the entire time as finally Tibby began devouring her food. He watched them for several minutes before he went back to the hut for more meals. His next trip to the larger pen would require him to carry four buckets at one time. That was okay; even though he was growing older, he was still big and strong.

The problem with Simon wasn't his size. He'd been born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his throat, and he didn't breathe right away. They said it damaged his brain. Simon wasn't sure about that. A man didn't need to know more than his job required, and Simon knew everything about the cats. They loved him, or at least some of them did. He loved them all, even the mean ones. It wasn't their fault.

His birth injury didn't, however, damage Simon's growth and by the time he was eighteen, he stood six feet seven. When you added his weight to his height, he was overwhelming to the average person. Simon tried not to let stares and mean words by the sanctuary visitors get to him. His world was the cats which were rescued from zoos and private owners. Savage Sanctuary Island made some of its money off people visiting and seeing the rescued cats in their natural habitat. It was all for show because when normals weren't on the island, the cats were kept in small cages and bad things happened. Simon hated thinking about the bad things.

Normals were not cat people. They wanted to stare, watch them eat, and pat themselves on the back for donating money to a good cause. They thought the cats were better off than if they were out in the wild, which simply wasn't true. Simon knew this because no matter what people called him, he wasn't stupid. His job was to care for the cats, and he was very good at his job.

Simon fed the lions and other cats giving the occasional head rub or chin scratch to the cats who loved him. He saved his favorite cage for last. He went back to the hut for tastier food because he liked to spoil Indra. Unlike the other cats, he entered Indra's cage and pet the large, orange striped head that rubbed against his side. Indra

was an eight-foot-long Bengal tiger who weighed over three hundred pounds.

“How are you, buddy? I brought one of your favorites as a surprise.”

Indra never attacked his food. He loved Simon and always wanted affection first. Rubbing Indra’s head was no hardship. The sleek fur was coarser than a house cat's but less rough than a lion's. His head had the softest fur on his body, but Simon knew Indra loved belly scratches the most, so after the greeting, he sat beside the cat, who immediately rolled to his back in expectation.

Tigers can't purr, but Indra made deep chuffling sounds that meant he liked Simon’s attention. A few minutes passed before Simon stood and walked to the bucket. He spilled the contents on the cage floor so Indra could eat his special treat first, which was a whole chicken, feathers and all. Simon had found the dead chicken in the coop that morning. The hen was old and, within the next few weeks, she would have been chopped up and used as a meal anyway. Simon didn't like when animals in his care died, but this was part of his job at Savage Sanctuary and the cats had to eat.

He walked slowly to the corner of the pen. He respected Indra and understood that the tiger, acting on instinct, could hurt or kill Simon without meaning to. He sat down and pulled his own breakfast from his pocket. It was a burrito wrapped in plastic that Yolanda at the cafeteria had given him. He slowly peeled back the wrapping and waited for Indra to investigate.

The big cat moved with grace and power, so quiet and stealthy, it was almost like he was stalking Simon. Indra wasn’t aware that his size alone intimidated people. He had been a bottle-fed cub, raised by a private illegal owner. The man got caught running a financial scam, and Indra was confiscated by the local wildlife authorities. Eventually, they placed him on the island. Simon knew these things because the librarian on shore had read the newspaper article about Indra to him. It was also why he knew the tiger's name and what it meant. Indra was named after the Hindu god of

thunder and war, a fitting name for the goliath beast with the heart of the most precious golden retriever.

With the help of his friend the librarian on the mainland, Mrs. Miller, Simon was learning to read. Many words were difficult, and even when he slowly sounded them out, they didn't always make sense. Mrs. Miller told him to be patient with himself. Simon knew that one day he would be smart if he kept practicing and he refused to give up. His lessons with Mrs. Miller helped him understand more overall and he didn't get confused as often. He even knew how to say a few big words and knew their meaning.

Simon had to keep his attempts to read a secret. Jerry didn't want him to learn anything other than caring for the cats and if he knew Simon might read someday, Jerry would fire him. If that happened, Simon didn't know what he would do. The cats needed him.

He tore a small piece of his burrito off and offered it to Indra. The cat sniffed before he delicately removed it from Simon's fingers.

"You have your own, so go eat it," he told the old cat. Indra was eleven, and tigers in captivity only lived between fifteen and twenty years.

Indra wandered back to his food and began eating his surprise first, just how Simon knew he would. The cat was always curious about what Simon ate, but he only needed a taste to know the food on the ground was better.

When Simon finished his meal, he stood slowly and walked to the door of the cage. He never approached Indra when he ate. He looked at his left hand where three fingers were missing and tried not to think about the pain or the infection that had kept him in bed for weeks. Simon had placed his hand through the bars to pet a male lion named Cleveland. He hadn't been paying attention to the lion's agitation and had

no idea that one of the females in the next pen had gone into heat.

In the wild, Cleveland would have followed the female around until she allowed him to mate with her. The male lion's frustration from being kept away from her was very real and it cost Simon his fingers. Good lessons worked like that, and he paid closer attention now, no matter what was going on in the rest of the sanctuary.

Simon turned the corner of the long trail and stopped.

“You weren’t in the pen with that animal again, were you?” Jerry yelled, his face reddening.

Jerry, with his slicked back stringy hair, his face thin with prominent cheek bones and a nose that was too sizes too big, owned the island and the cats. He stood a little over five feet and twitched nervously whenever he was close to any animal. He always complained about business and Simon’s failure to understand how tight money was. He insisted on dressing in a suit no matter the weather and Simon had never understood. Maybe Jerry wouldn’t be as mean if he dressed in work jeans.

Simon looked down at his feet when the question was asked, not meeting the shorter man's eyes. “No sir, Mr. Jerry. Through the bars, like you showed me. ”

Jerry continued to stare for a moment but Simon knew he hadn’t seen him in Indra’s cage.

“Be sure it stays that way,” Jerry finally said. “I’m watching the weather and there’s a tropical storm building to the south of us. Be sure the animals are secure. If the storm passes in time, we’ll have a big weekend.”

To Jerry, they were always just animals. He didn’t take time to learn their names or make friends with any of them. He cared about making money and to do that he had

to break rules. Simon hated those broken rules but he knew nothing about business. Jerry was the smart one and Simon did as he was told.

When USDA inspectors came to the island, Simon wasn't allowed to speak to them and he was told to stay out of sight as much as possible. He overheard Jerry telling one inspector that Simon had been deaf and dumb since birth. It had made Simon sad that Jerry lied about him. Though this happened years ago, since that day, Simon wanted to be smarter. To do that, he had to read and that was why Mrs. Miller helped him. She showed him books that came with cassette tapes so that he could follow the words. She gave him a tape and letter book that explained what sounds went with what letter. He had sneaked them to the island and hid them in his room, which was built onto the hut where the cat's food was kept and prepared.

Mrs. Miller also gave him novels on tape for adults. He couldn't read the books yet, but he liked the stories and he learned about the world. Espionage thrillers were his favorite, but he'd also listened to James Herriot and learned about caring for different animals. If Simon could be anything he wanted, he would be a veterinarian.

At night, Simon struggled through the words in story books made for children. He tried not to bang his fists against anything in frustration because when that happened, things broke. He promised himself that one day he would be smart.

Simon lifted his head and looked into Jerry's eyes. "I always make sure the animals are secure," he lied.

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Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

Misty felt desolate as she studied the white-painted room's bare walls through red puffy eyes. Her parents' house was similar, though they had a picture of Jesus hanging on the cross in the front room. When her tears finally dried, she checked the only other door in the room and found a closet. It was divided into two sections, one with a rod and the other side with shelves. Three identical dresses to the one she wore hung inside. A dark gray dress hung beside them. A single pair of black boots sat on the floor beneath the dresses. On the shelves were seven pairs of white socks, seven plain white nightgowns, and the same amount of underwear.

The horrifying thing that caught her eye on the bottom shelf was a bedpan. Her mother had a cesarean section when Noah was born and Misty had emptied and cleaned a bedpan for her mom on the first days after the birth. Her mother had planned to have Noah at home but after two days of labor, she was taken to the hospital.

It made her father angry that he had to waste the Lord's money and had insisted her mother return home the following morning after the surgery. Her mother had told Misty where she would find the bedpan after she was unable to rise from her bed. Misty had taken care of her mother and also newborn Noah.

She closed the closet door and leaned against it. The bathroom was down the hall and the bedpan made sense if she was to be locked in the room each day, but she hated the thought. Misty couldn't help thinking about why she was here. Her parents had threatened to send her to a place that fixed troubled girls, and they had done it. Another sob built in her throat, but she held it back.

One of the leaders of their church, an old man, Pastor Glen, had decided that Misty would make him a good wife. Her parents agreed, but Misty did not. She had been raised to always obey her mother and father, but the pastor gave her the creeps. He had been watching her like a hungry animal since she was ten. When she tried to explain this to her parents, she was locked in her room and only allowed out for daily prayer.

Her little brother, Noah, was the only person who kept her sane. He poked food beneath her door when her dad was working and her mom was busy. They fed her, but not much, and it made Noah angry. He also sat outside her room and talked to her about his day. Noah was four years old, and he loved her as much as she loved him.

She was locked in her bedroom for two weeks before she was kidnapped. Was it kidnapping if her parents said the men could take her? Misty didn't know. She realized there was a lot she didn't know.

She walked to the bed and lay back, her feet dangling over the side. She had been wrong; there was a bottom sheet, but under that was a bare mattress. The ceiling was also white. There was a crack high in the corner where the ceiling met the wall. It wasn't very big, but like her bedroom at home, she figured she would learn every defect in this room before she left.

Marrying that horrible old man was out of the question, and she didn't care how righteous he was, how the other girls were envious that he had picked her, or how the Lord wanted their marriage to happen. If she couldn't come home until she agreed to marry him, she would never go home.

This time the tears fell. How could she survive without Noah? He was too young to understand. She brought her feet up and rolled to her side in misery and let her sadness take over.

The door rattled, and she jerked upright facing it when it opened. Another woman stood there, dressed the same as the woman from earlier, and maybe a bit younger. Her hair was light brown with gray streaks, her mouth, a slash of firm lips, let Misty know she wouldn't find a friend. Not that she really had friends. She was homeschooled and only saw the girls at church twice a week for a few minutes. Church was for worshipping the Lord. It was not for gossip.

Misty's school life revolved around the Bible and learning what it took to be a proper wife and mother. She prepared daily meals for her parents and helped her mother around the house with chores. They had chickens, and Noah gathered eggs with her and also helped feed them. He was just beginning to have his own chores to keep him busy.

Misty's mother was a quiet woman who obeyed her husband, and her husband obeyed God. From what Misty saw, God didn't visit their home often. Her mother always seemed sad but never defended Misty. She had even come into her room crying and begged her to marry Pastor Glen.

"Your father will continue to punish you until you do as the Lord commands," her mother had said.

"I won't," Misty cried, unwilling to give in to her mother's tears.

Her food was reduced to one meal a day after that. If it weren't for the small tidbits her brother managed to hide and share, she would have half-starved.

"Come with me," the second woman said, her voice more lyrical and not as harsh as the first woman.

Misty wondered how she should address them. She stood and followed the second woman down the long hall to the stairs. She saw a group of girls below, dressed

identically to her, walking single file, their heads bowed until they were out of sight. The woman took Misty to the second landing and a small room halfway down the hallway.

She pointed to the chair in front of a desk, and Misty sat down. The woman walked around the desk and took a seat. The room was as plain as the bedroom. A folder and pen were the only two items on the desk.

"You will call me Mrs. Sanders," the woman said and lifted her eyebrows when Misty didn't acknowledge her statement. "The proper response is 'Yes, Mrs. Sanders.'"

"I was told not to speak," Misty said softly. She wasn't trying to provoke the woman, but Misty would be sure she followed the rules to the letter.

Mrs. Sanders' eyes narrowed. "I believe you think you are smart. Let me avail you with certainty that you are not. Punishment is swift here. You may speak when asked a question. Your answers should be little more than a 'yes' or 'no' along with the proper greeting of the adult asking the question." Her eyes narrowed even further, and now she looked as if she were squinting. "So there is no misunderstanding, your answer should have been, 'Yes, Mrs. Sanders.'" She stared at Misty for a moment. "We will try again. Do you understand what I have told you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sanders," Misty recited.

The woman didn't smile, but the scrunch of her nose relaxed slightly.

"This is your orientation, where you will learn our rules and the consequences of breaking those rules. I can see by the mark on your face that adjusting may take a bit of time. I'm sure Mrs. Turney didn't introduce herself before she used her cane." There was no trace of compassion in the woman's voice. "I, on the other hand, prefer

different methods to make young ladies comply, and that is where we will start." She took a piece of paper from the folder and slid it across the desk.

It was a list of rules.

Mrs. Sanders read them: "One, you will wake at six each morning and be prepared for your day by six-fifteen when your door will be unlocked. Your bed must be made and you must be dressed in proper attire. If you have waste, you will carry it to the toilet and take your turn emptying before returning to your room to leave the waste receptacle behind before you eat breakfast. Walking anywhere on campus requires an escort. When you are walking with other students, you will stay silent in a single file line with your head up enough to see where you are going. Downcast eyes makes a good preparation for marriage and will show you as humble and waiting for your next command." She stopped and took a breath. "You will shower twice a week on your assigned days or evenings. Three, you will be assigned daily chores as well as keeping your room spotless. Four, missing daily lessons in comportment or prayer sessions which are also daily, will not be tolerated. Do you understand these rules?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sanders."

The woman's chin dipped slightly in acknowledgment of Misty's answer.

"Now we will move to the punishments. They are also listed. The cane, you are aware of. Being remanded to your room with only bread and water is another. Wall time is also used. For your smart mouth earlier, I will teach you what it means. Stand."

A nervous flutter filled Misty's stomach, but she stood.

"Come here and face the wall, your nose touching. You will stay like this until I tell you to move."

Misty walked slowly to the wall and faced it.

"Lean in," Mrs. Sanders said. "Your nose must touch at all times, with your arms at your sides."

Misty did as she was told. The tears started again, and it took everything she had not to scream.

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Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

The storm blew over, and the weekend would be as busy as Jerry had promised. Simon moved all the lions, except for Carla and Tibby, into the public enclosure. According to State rules, new cats had to stay in quarantine for thirty days.

The enclosures built for the normals so they could get up close and personal with the cats were too small. It caused dangerous interactions. But the paying customers Simon called “normals” liked it when the cats fought. The bloodier the fight, the more money Savage Sanctuary made.

Simon worried about the lions the most and had moved them last.

“Hurry,” Jerry yelled, giving Simon a furious glare.

Going fast caused accidents, but Simon didn’t tell Jerry this. He did his job in the same slow and easy manner that never upset the animals.

He nodded his head at Jerry when the last lion was released into the habitat and the entry door locked. After changing his glare to a scowl, Jerry radioed that the people on the boat could disembark. Savage Sanctuary was on an island half a mile off the Atlantic coast of Florida. The only way to it was by boat or helicopter. The important visitors who Simon hated, the ones Jerry called VIPs, came in by air. The normals took a charter boat that ran Thursday through Sunday strictly for the sanctuary. If the people had enough money, there were several rooms available on the island where they could stay. Their windows overlooked the habitats so they could live among the cats from the safety of their enclosed rooms. Thankfully, no one rented those rooms

this weekend so the cats could go into their separate pens at night.

The new group arrived at the lion enclosure, and Jerry began his speech. "In the wild, these majestic creatures live a short lifespan due to hunger, disease, and larger predators. Here at Savage Sanctuary, we offer the animals a better chance at survival while also giving them a sense of the wild. These cats are maneaters, and sometimes, like they do in nature, they eat each other. It's completely natural, and that's what we want you to witness." He carried a metal rod and ran it over the bars of the door, knowing the cats didn't like the noise and became agitated. He looked at the people and purposely widened his grin until all you saw were perfect white teeth. "Who paid to throw out the first chicken?"

The chickens' feet were tied, but they were still alive when tossed into the enclosure. The people went crazy with their shouts, cheers, and squeals as the chickens squawked for their very short life. Jerry had told Simon that in other countries, the customers were able to buy animals such as calves, goats, and pigs to feed the carnivores while the animals were alive like the chickens. Jerry hated that he could only use poultry when normals would pay more for larger animals. They loved the gruesome terror and Simon hated them for it.

Jerry's words had the right effect on his audience. The visitors went crazy. The men got that animalistic expression on their faces. Sometimes the women did too, but mostly they screamed and covered their eyes. Three people paid to feed the cats, and unfortunately, there were nine lions, and the three birds weren't much of a meal. On visitor days, Jerry didn't allow Simon to feed the cats. He wanted them hungry and on edge.

A fight broke out between two males, and Milo, the younger one, got a nasty gash on his flank that would most likely require stitches. That too would wait until the sanctuary closed. For now, Milo would suffer and possibly be attacked again and killed. Donations poured in like crazy when that happened.

“Animals are animals,” Jerry would tell him. “People don’t mind when they act like it.”

He was right, though Simon thought it very wrong.

When he was assured that Milo stayed in the corner of the enclosure and wasn’t wandering around with his injury, Simon went to check on Indra. He found him in the pool, which was what he expected. Indra, like most tigers, loved the water. The cat swam a few laps and then simply lay in the shallows, allowing the water to cover his fur.

There were four other tigers in the enclosure with him, all younger, and none domesticated like Indra. They were zoo tigers that were sent after the owner died and the family decided to sell off everything. From the corner of his eye, he saw Indra swat his massive paw in the water. How Simon wished he could play with him. The younger tigers wandered the enclosure, sniffing and growling, waiting for the visitors to feed them.

Simon hated it so much and had refused to tie the chickens up for feeding years ago. The argument with Jerry about feeding was one he wished he could forget. Simon had cried until snot hung from his nose, and Jerry couldn’t take it .

“One day, one of your pets will eat you. I hope there isn’t much left to clean up because it would be an inconvenience,” Jerry said, his tone disgusted.

Simon knew he could be eaten by simply making a mistake. He tried to be very careful. Maybe one day, Jerry would get eaten, and someone new would take over the sanctuary. He wouldn’t mind cleaning up what was left of Jerry’s body if that were the case.

He watched while the crowd moved to the tigers, and the same feeding display took

place after Jerry's bullshit overview. Indra never went after the live chickens. From the time he was a cub, he'd only been fed dead food. He preferred it and he would stay hungry until Simon fed him again. This was also the reason Jerry hated Indra. A cat who didn't produce money was a waste to the sanctuary.

Simon told Mrs. Miller at the library that he was worried that Jerry would get rid of Indra. He didn't tell her how because that was a secret no one could know. She came out and took pictures of Indra one day when the sanctuary was closed and Jerry in the city. She'd started Indra a social media account and he quickly gained a large following. Getting rid of him would cause an uproar. Simon had to repress his smile while thinking about it.

He decided to check on Milo, so he didn't need to watch what was happening with the tigers. Jerry stopped talking for a moment and approached him before he left the area .

"The two female cats were purchased. It will happen next week."

Anger boiled inside Simon. "Purchased" meant a hunter wanted them for a trophy. It also meant how the two lions came to the park was a lie. The cats who were hunted had no paper trail. Simon should have known something was up, but he had missed the clues.

Seeing Simon's anger, Jerry stepped into his personal space. Simon was taller by more than a foot and a half, and Jerry's head cranked back so he could look Simon in the eyes.

"Don't give me your crybaby attitude, you moron. They're animals. You do the job you're paid for, or you'll find a new job. There are people waiting in line for the honor of working here, and they would be half the trouble you are."

“Yes, Mr. Jerry,” Simon said and looked down. He didn’t know if Jerry was telling the truth or not, but it scared him.

Jerry turned and walked over to the crowd. Simon headed to Milo. He couldn’t help the scene that played in his head of Indra eating Jerry. He couldn’t hide that smile.

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Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

After orientation and an almost unbearable hour on the wall, Misty was kept in her room for another hour. A loud alarm sounded from the hallway, and she jumped an inch off the bed. A few minutes later, her door was unlocked, and she was told to follow the others to the cafeteria. Her stomach made all kinds of noises because of hunger, and she was also thirstier than she ever remembered being.

“The others” were girls from her floor. She followed them, head down, her knees knocking beneath the dress. The first girl in line stopped at the second landing and waited for the girls from that floor to precede her down the stairs.

After several turns, they came to a large room with one long table in the center. Misty noticed a young girl walking through a door on the other side of the room with a large tray before looking back to the girl in front of her. The first girl in line walked to the last seat and stood behind the chair.

Plates with food were already on the table. Nothing fancy, but by this time, Misty didn't care. When all the girls were in place, Mrs. Turney, the woman who had shown her to her room earlier, cleared her throat.

“The Lord provides for the respectable girls here,” she said. “You know this, but you continue to break our rules. These rules are in place to teach you humility, grace, and obedience. When you fail, you are punished because that is God's plan.” Her eyes traveled both sides of the table until they fell on one skinny girl with a chipped front tooth. “Sarah, you will eat no food tonight at this table.”

Misty hadn't noticed Mrs. Sanders until she stepped forward and took the plate of food away. Mrs. Turney wasn't finished and stopped at another girl. "Emma, you will also go without food."

The girl gave a small, strangled cry which was quickly shut down when Mrs. Sanders smacked her on the back of the head.

"You may be seated," Mrs. Turney said.

They took their seats. Misty followed their lead when they clasped their hands together in front of them and bowed their heads.

Mrs. Turney said the prayer. "Dear Lord, thank you for the gifts you give us this day and for keeping the girls turned from the dark forces of Satan. As we consume this meal, may it purify our evil thoughts and guide us in service. Grant us the light to serve you. May this sustenance nourish our intentions and fortify our will to serve you. In the name of Jesus, we are grateful for your guidance as we battle the inherent evil inside each woman. We strive to be modest and chaste as you have commanded us. We accept your punishments for our transgressions to make us better followers of your words. Amen."

"Amen," the girls said in unison before they lifted their forks.

"You may eat," Mrs. Turney said.

Misty couldn't keep from looking at the two seats where the girls' meals were removed. They both sat, stiff-backed, looking down at their empty place settings. Even their water glasses were gone.

She eyed her meal and she wasn't as hungry as she was when she entered. Misty also knew that if she didn't eat, she would be punished. The food was tasteless but it could

have been worse. She didn't look at the hungry girls again; it was too hard. She ate every bite and drank all her water.

Mrs. Turney clapped her hands together twice.

"If it is your day and time to shower, you may leave. Sarah and Emma, you will return to your rooms where there is bread and water waiting. If it is your shower night, you will stay filthy like the wicked girls you are." Six girls, including Sarah and Emma, left the room.

Those who remained stayed silent until the adults left. Low whispers started up slowly.

"My name is Paige," the girl next to Misty said.

"I'm Misty."

"It's hard in the beginning, but this place really sucks after you've been here a day or two," she said with a broad smile that showed her teeth. Her hair was a shade lighter than Misty's and her face a bit rounder but she looked to be around fifteen.

Misty tried to grasp Paige's use of the word 'sucked' but wasn't quite sure what she meant. Then she noticed large holes in Paige's earlobes and couldn't help staring. The Lord did not allow girls to desecrate their bodies with worldly items, and she had never seen a girl with holes like that.

Paige's fingers went to one ear after she noticed what caught Misty's attention. "They made me take out my tunnels," she said. "Thankfully these holes are too big to close." Paige shrugged. "They would have gone crazy if I got the tattoo I wanted." Misty couldn't stop her gasp and Paige's smile grew. "You're one of the girls that never broke the rules at home, aren't you?"

“I broke rules,” Misty said defensively because she didn’t want Paige to think less of her for her compliance.

“Oh yeah, what rules?” Paige challenged.

“I’m here because I wouldn’t marry the dirty old pastor in our church.”

Paige laughed loudly.

“Shush,” the girl sitting on Paige’s opposite side commanded, her eyes going to the closed door.

Paige gave her an irritated glance before she turned her attention back to Misty.

“Look,” she lowered her voice. “I don’t plan on staying here. If you want, you can come with me. Think about it. The only time we have to talk is after dinner if there aren’t too many rule breaks during the day.”

Misty had been warned by her parents about girls like Paige, worldly girls that would lead her to sin. Those lessons didn’t seem to matter right now. There was something intriguing about Paige.

“Maybe,” Misty said.

“That’s good enough for now. I don’t know when it will be, but if you betray me, sleep lightly, because I will hurt you.”

“Okay?” Misty said, and it was more like a question.

“I like you,” Paige said and smiled. “I think we will get along. That’s hard here. I noticed the bruise on your face and I took a wild guess that you were a rule breaker

like me. I can tell I'm better at it though. For now, we behave. It will keep them from guessing our plans."

Misty had nothing planned but she nodded.

Another bell rang and the girls stood as one. The girl closest to the door on her side walked toward it. Paige stayed where she was when Misty followed.

"I have cleanup duty," she said semi-loudly as Misty headed for the door.

"Stay away from her or she will get you in trouble," the girl who sat on the other side of Misty whispered.

That was okay. Being good her entire life got Misty sent here. Maybe it was time she broke some rules.

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Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon checked the cat pens one last time before he headed to his room. He received equal measures of growls and purrs from the lions, and hissing from smaller breeds. Overall, about half the cats were Simon-friendly and half were not. He fed them every meal they consumed, which gave him special privileges. He also knew all the cats were dangerous to most humans, even Indra. The large tiger had a calm reputation, but that meant nothing. He was still a wild animal. Simon always remembered that, and when it slipped his mind, he only had to look where his missing fingers should be .

He opened the door to the feeding hut, and the smell of old meat filled his nostrils. He didn't mind; it was simply something that went along with caring for large cats.

His tiny bedroom, located on the far side of the hut, consisted of a single, wobbly bed that barely fit his girth and left his feet hanging over the end. He never bothered making it, and the covers were a rumpled mess. Using bricks and scrap wood, Simon had built a shelf unit that sat along one wall and held most of his clothes. It was so much better than living on the streets that no matter how it looked, Simon thought of it as his castle.

The bathroom was on the opposite side of the hut. The toilet and shower were old and yellowed, but they worked, and Simon valued being clean after a long day. It was something else he brought with him mentally. The ability to use the toilet and take a shower were part of his castle.

The center of the hut held a ten-foot-long metal prep table for butchering. He made

his own meals there too. Four large freezers took up the most wall space. They held the frozen meat that was purchased in bulk.

He loved this place, smells and all.

Before Jerry brought him to the sanctuary, Simon had lived under a freeway overpass for a long time. He'd been raised in a group home, but after he turned eighteen, they'd kicked him out with an extra set of clothes and a hundred dollars. It was more money than he'd ever seen. It took two days before someone stole the money and clothes so he only had what he wore on his back. Those were the bad times when he was always hungry.

Simon couldn't find a job due to the problems he was born with. Add in the lack of decent clothing, and he didn't have a chance. People saw his size and their eyes grew large and fearful. Once they spoke to him, they snickered and made fun of who he was. The people on the streets were different. They minded their own business and didn't want you in theirs. The isolation became his way of life. The world was a cruel place and Simon was kicked from one location to another by police until he found the overpass.

He didn't like remembering his time at the group home or his time on the streets. One of the ladies at the home told him he was there because his mother didn't want a brain-damaged baby. There was never any mention of a father, but most kids in the home didn't have dads, and some never knew their mothers.

Simon lived in the same group home since he was a baby. His earliest memory was someone picking him up when he was crying and putting him in his room, then locking the door so he couldn't get out. He was maybe three. There was never consistency, which he didn't like. The adults who worked there, especially the nice ones, never stayed for long and the rules changed constantly .

That's why he liked the sanctuary so much. It rarely changed. Jerry would always be mean. Simon would continue to give the cats the best life possible. For him, this was great. For the cats, Simon's care might be the only kindness they'd ever had. They deserved freedom.

He hated what would happen to Carla and Tibby, but he knew there was nothing he could do. The state kept a close watch on legal cats, but the ones they didn't know about fell through the cracks. Jerry had lectured him too many times on how much it cost to keep the sanctuary running. The money Carla and Tibby would bring from an illegal hunt would mean the other cats got special meals for a short time.

Jerry always told him he was broke and keeping the sanctuary open was hard. He'd warned for too many years to count that he would just close the place and get a job that would pay more. Simon believed the threat so he did the things he didn't like doing. All but tying the chicken's feet. That he could not do.

He spent extra time watching the two females while they ate that morning, his stomach not feeling well when he thought about what would happen to them. He loved them already, even though they only growled and snarled when he came around. They were frightened and they had good reason to be.

These thoughts tumbled through his head while he tried to fall asleep. When they wouldn't go away, he took the blanket from the bed and headed to Indra's cage. He'd done this many nights, and it was the safest time to spend with Indra because the darkness scared Jerry, and if he stayed overnight on the island, he never came close to the cages after the sun went down.

Indra gave a distinctive chortle when Simon unlocked his pen and came inside. He immediately walked up to the big man and rubbed his head over the side of Simon's leg.

“I hope you need company,” Simon said and scratched his fingers into the dense fur.

He went to the corner, spread the blanket, and lifted the side so it half-covered him after he lay down. Indra took the other side, and Simon scooted into his warmth. They’d slept many nights this way. He inhaled the scent of tiger and the other smells from the night: saltwater, machine oil, which Simon used to oil the cage doors, a little mold, and a lot of Indra’s unique musk that was truly his own. Simon loved Indra’s scent the most, though he liked how all the cats smelled from day one.

Indra quieted quickly and fell asleep, which allowed Simon to drift off.

The humidity rose high during the night, giving a heavy feel to the air. Simon instinctually knew a large storm was moving in, possibly a hurricane. It could be a week before the actual storm hit, but if you knew the signs, it was easy to tell. The ache in his knees stayed in the background as he went about his day, keeping an eye on the sky.

After he finished the morning feeding, Jerry came to the hut to speak with him. “There’s a delay on the two females. It won’t be this week.”

Jerry knew that Simon was well aware of what happened when the cats were purchased but Jerry still talked in code. It was like he thought Simon wore a wire or something and would turn him in. If Simon could figure out a way to report Jerry and still care for his friends, he would have done it years ago. And yet, Jerry treated him like an outsider who was always out to get him.

“When will it be?” Simon asked, forgetting to slow his words.

Jerry’s eyes narrowed like they did whenever Simon spoke faster than usual or said something Jerry thought was beyond him. It was happening more and more because Simon forgot he had to keep talking like he was stupid and not use the big words he

heard on the audio books.

During his childhood, Simon didn't like to speak. His jaws were large, and words were sometimes hard to form. It wasn't until he began working with the cats and whispering to them that the words became easier.

"You're sounding educated," Jerry accused. "Don't think you're fooling me. If I'm in trouble, you're in trouble. These animals can live without you. They can't live without the money I make for them."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Jerry," he said.

"Cut the dumb act," Jerry snapped.

Simon shuffled from one foot to another, not knowing how to respond. He lifted his gaze to Jerry's, shuffled his feet again, and looked back at the floor.

"You really are a dumbass, aren't you?" Jerry finally said.

Simon acted exactly as Jerry expected and didn't answer. Jerry was the oblivious one, and Simon had figured that out the first year he'd worked for him. Due to Simon's size, Jerry thought he would be good with the cats. He hadn't been wrong, but it had nothing to do with his size. It was more about his demeanor, his soft voice, and that he was the one who fed them.

"The weatherman says another tropical storm is building, and it could turn into a hurricane. Double-check the cages twice until it passes," Jerry ordered. He never stayed on the island during storms. Simon had figured out that he was too afraid of the cats and wouldn't take a chance that they would get loose. Simon smiled as soon as Jerry turned his back and walked out.

If Jerry did stay on the island, he would have a right to be afraid. The storm probably kept the hunters away from the island too. It all worked in Simon's favor because the cats needed a break, and the storm would provide it.

He cleaned cages, gave Milo an antibiotic injection after examining his stitches, and checked on the lighthouse before he finished for the day. The lighthouse ensured that boats didn't get caught on the rocks during a storm on the backside of the island.

The front or southern part of the island had a large lagoon where the boat docked. A fence enclosed the area from the dock to the buildings. A locked gate at the end of the fence blocked normals from entering until Jerry unlocked it. They never disembarked until Jerry radioed Roberto who unlocked the gate and welcomed the guests. There was a one-story building that housed the cafeteria, giftshop, and Jerry's office which had the apartment connected behind it where he lived when he stayed overnight on the island. Another building sat to the side which held the three apartments that backed up to the cat enclosures.

If you divided the island into three sections, there was the area the normals saw, the back area that held the real cages the cats used when they weren't staged, along with the hut that Simon lived in, and what they called the jungle. Jerry had never had a third of the island cleared, and it was overgrown and swampy. This made it more real for the cat hunters, and they paid extra for the experience of hunting in a so-called jungle.

Roberto, Simon's friend, handled the gate and did maintenance around the island, but he left each day on a small boat and didn't spend the night. Yolanda, his wife, cooked and generally ran the cafeteria; she left with him each evening.

Simon liked them both. They came to work on the island about ten years after him and they quickly became part of his family. Yolanda made Simon special food, just like he did for the cats. He'd pretended they were his parents in the beginning. It

would have been nice if they had been, but Simon knew how lucky he was to live how he did and do a job he loved.

Jerry also hired a few young, pretty girls who waited on the normals in the gift shop and helped Yolanda in the cafeteria. They made Simon nervous because if they didn't look fearfully at him, they giggled and laughed. He didn't know which was worse. Thankfully, they never stayed on the island overnight.

Simon tried not to dwell on the bad things because it made him grumpy and sad, but in his heart, he knew the island was an evil place.

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Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

Misty's first week was excruciatingly painful. She was accustomed to strict discipline, but not to unjust or excessive punishments for any made-up infraction Mrs. Sanders or Mrs. Turney could think of. Of the two women, Misty preferred Mrs. Sanders, but that wasn't saying much. Both women were sociopaths in Paige's book, and Misty was listening more and more to Paige.

She'd spent hours praying on her knees, doing wall time, and trying to avoid strikes from Mrs. Turney's cane. Her arms hurt from the strikes she couldn't avoid. None of the girls were exempt from punishment, though Misty saw that some had it worse than others. She felt sorry for the girls who were as young as ten. How could their parents send them to this place? Misty would never understand.

After a week of long boring evenings that gave her too much time to think, she was assigned to dinner cleanup with Paige. She discovered this was generally the first assignment for new girls. Because of Paige's continuous transgressions, she'd been working cleanup duty since she came here the year before. The coveted jobs were cooking, gardening, and serving. On the lower end was kitchen cleanup, laundry, and garbage collection. Every girl in the school was required to spend Saturdays cleaning the entire building from top to bottom. It made Sundays, the day of prayer and reflection, a welcome time of relaxation.

Though Misty's infractions were small, they added up. By day three, she had several new bruises on her legs because Mrs. Turney had started aiming for them. Misty spent so much time on the wall, she decided she actually preferred the cane strikes because the pain disappeared quickly, whereas wall time left her bored out of her

mind with sore shoulders and legs afterward.

The punishments were unfair and made to wear her down. This information also came courtesy of Paige. Misty stayed in awe of her new friend. She broke the rules more than anyone else and she took her punishments without a sound or a tear. What Misty loved was the look in Paige's eyes while the punishments were taking place. Mrs. Sanders and Mrs. Turney should double-check their locked doors at night. No matter how much they punished Paige, they couldn't wear her down. Misty respected her new friend's willfulness.

"My parents don't want me back," she told Misty the first night they worked together. "The instructors here know it, and they enjoy causing me pain and humiliation. I'll be in here until I'm eighteen, or at least that's what they think. I'm running, and this time they won't catch me."

Misty couldn't imagine being in this place for years. She understood why her friend planned to run. Paige was a mix of stubbornness and fresh air. Misty had never known anyone like her. The thing that stunned her most about Paige was she had no fear of damnation.

"I don't believe that garbage, and many others don't believe it either," she'd told Misty several nights into kitchen cleanup duty.

Misty expected the roof to cave in and looked upward. Paige laughed. Misty had lived in a Christian home and she'd never heard anyone utter the things that Paige said. Fire and brimstone had been at the forefront of every church sermon she'd attended. The words were carried on through her father's daily prayers and stern punishments. Misty feared damnation beyond anything else in her short life. Or at least she had. Paige's assessment of life was sinking into Misty and untangling things she'd never thought about before.

Paige committed blasphemy on an hourly loop and sometimes minute by minute.

“You shouldn’t say those things,” Misty told her.

Paige shrugged and her eyes grew hard. “Do you ever think about all the crazy things your parents told you?” she demanded.

Misty’s back went up at the attack on her parents and then she realized defending them was ridiculous. So called loving mothers and fathers sent their girls here to be tortured. How could she defend that?

“I only know what my parents taught me. I don’t think it’s all crazy,” Misty replied, struggling to not fully defend them.

Paige’s hands went to her hips. “Did your mother ever say you would be punished when your father came home?”

It had happened when Misty did something wrong, usually stubbornness, and she nodded at her friend.

“Right there is a problem,” Paige pointed out. “Your father punished you. Is he a bad guy?”

“No, I guess not,” Misty said in thought. “It’s his job to take care of the family and that includes punishment.” Misty was unsure where Paige was going with this.

“There’s your answer,” Paige said with satisfaction.

Misty was totally lost. “I don’t get it.”

“Who does God use to punish us? He doesn’t seem to do it himself because no one

blames him. I figured this out a long time ago. God is like your mother and he's just saying, wait until your father comes home. If Satan does the punishing, he must be the father. Maybe that makes God the mother and wouldn't that be hysterical?"

The thoughts Paige put in Misty's head kept her awake long into the night. She reviewed everything she'd been taught by her parents since the day she was born. Like Santa Claus, was it all a lie? The thought that there was no God terrified Misty. There had to be. She liked Paige so much but she also disturbed Misty too. Simply having a friend was wonderful and she found Paige exciting. The real world fascinated Misty, especially the parts about living on the streets, finding food, and staying warm and dry. She couldn't stop asking questions, and their nights on kitchen duty gave her the opportunity.

"I lived on the street for ten months," Paige told Misty proudly. "It's not as great as I thought it would be, but it was better than this place. The cops caught me stealing, and I ended up here because my parents consider me a bad influence on proper children," she said in a deep voice that Misty figured had to be an imitation of Paige's father.

The thought of sleeping in the open made Misty feel sick to her stomach. Paige said she worked, but she wouldn't go into detail. It was how she paid for the ear tunnels, though she had put the first holes in herself. The tunnels made them larger. It was an entirely new world to Misty, and she loved hearing about all the things she'd never witnessed or done herself.

Misty had no television in her home, and her father only played the radio. The shows were men talking about politics or preachers preaching. Paige liked to dance and sing while she worked in the kitchen where Mrs. Turney and Sanders couldn't see her. Dancing was a sin, and praising anyone with song other than the Lord was also a sin. But many things Paige talked about made Misty curious.

“How did you sleep without a bed? Did your ear hurt when you put the needle through? Does the tunnel hurt when you wear it?”

Paige answered with laughter most of the time. She considered Misty very naive.

“Before the pastor, didn’t you break any of the rules?” Paige asked the next night during cleanup.

“Sometimes, but I didn’t like being punished, and I wanted to spend time with my little brother.”

“When we get out of this place, I’ll show you some cool stuff, and you won’t ever want to go home,” Paige promised.

Misty missed her brother and, surprisingly, her parents, but if she had to marry the pastor, she never wanted to return home. If it weren’t for Paige, Misty didn’t think she would have survived her first days.

“You’re being overly dramatic,” Paige told her when she admitted to missing her parents. “Your mother and father think your brother is better off without you. Why do you think they were marrying you off? It’s illegal to marry in Florida until you’re sixteen and that’s with your parents’ permission. No one can give permission at fifteen. They would have made a fake birth certificate or taken you out of state to marry. One way or another, they were getting rid of you.”

Could Paige be right? Her words stung, but they made Misty think. She had helped out a lot when Noah was a baby but he was older now and she wasn’t needed as much. Marriage to the pastor had been such a surprise.

“Do you know a way out of here?” Misty asked on the fifth night they worked together. She’d spent four hours on the wall that day because Mrs. Sanders found a

wrinkle in her bedspread during room inspection.

“I have an idea,” Paige said. “I’ll know when it’s the right time.”

Paige thought for sure that Misty would go with her, but Misty wasn’t convinced yet. It sounded exciting, even if she had to sleep on the ground, but it also sounded scary. She really didn’t want holes in her ears or a tattoo. Paige said she had been saving for one, but the police took her money and it hadn’t been returned.

It was such a different world than the life Misty had grown up in. She wanted to have the courage Paige had, and still, she couldn’t commit to running away.

Misty’s days at the school were spent in bible study, prayer, reflection, punishment, and working. Each day she had an audience with Mrs. Turney. She wished it was Mrs. Sanders, but Paige told her the women divided the girls and the lucky ones got Sanders.

“What have you learned since coming here?” Mrs. Turney asked.

Misty stood in front of her desk, where there was no chair, and answered questions that would be sent back to her parents so they knew the changes the school was making in her behavior.

“I’ve learned to be on time, and to speak softly, Mrs. Turney,” Misty replied. Paige had given her things to say, which made it easy.

“That’s good,” she nodded her head. “Have you changed your mind about the concession the Lord has asked of you?”

The concession was marrying an old man, and Misty had never heard the Lord ask. She’d been commanded by her father.

“No, Mrs. Turney,” she replied.

“Place your hands flat on my desk,” Mrs. Turney said.

Having no idea what was coming, Misty did as she was told. Mrs. Turney brought the cane down on her fingers. It hurt so badly, Misty cried out and clasped her hands in front of her.

“I did not tell you to lift your hands and will add an extra swat because you did.”

Misty received eleven strikes, and she couldn’t stop her tears the entire time it happened.

A sadistic light shone in Mrs. Turney’s eyes by the time she finished. “When the Lord commands a young woman to do his bidding, he knows that sometimes that woman must be guided with the rod. I am that rod. Think about what you have been commanded to do and learn your place.”

Misty’s fingers were bruised and sore when she went to the kitchen that night after dinner. She muttered about Mrs. Turney being the actual devil and Paige gave a sad smile.

“We’ll put ice on your hands, and I’ll do all the cleanup tonight,” Paige said after Misty told her what happened and showed her the damage caused by the cane.

The ice made it bearable, and Paige made everything better. Having a friend changed Misty’s life.

She also learned that interviews with Mrs. Turney always ended in punishment. The following day, she received ten additional swats on her already sore fingers and two hours of wall time because she fell asleep in bible study.

“After we escape, Mrs. Turney will trip over her own feet and break her wrinkled face. We’ll laugh when we hear about it,” Paige said.

Misty didn’t ask how they would hear about it if they were gone because Paige’s words were starting to slide beneath her defenses, and leaving the home was becoming more of a possibility.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon had a radio in the hut that stayed on a weather station year-round. Florida was known for its rapidly changing weather. For animal safety, Simon needed time to prepare. This tropical storm had turned into a hurricane, and parts of the Florida coast were on evacuation notice. It wasn't just that the hurricanes were deadly; they brought tornadoes that destroyed everything in their path. The weather could be bad for days with power outages and lack of clean water. There was also a chance that the boat marina would be damaged and getting help to the island could take days. Handling storms had become second nature to Simon. It created a lot of work but there were also benefits and that's what he enjoyed.

Simon filled the water tanks that could last for a month if things got really bad. They also received a delivery of meat which filled two of three empty freezers. The food would sustain the cats through the storm and a few days beyond. Jerry made deals with people in the area for goats, pigs, and other livestock that became ill or were too old for anything but slaughter. The animals were delivered whole, and Simon chopped them into appropriate sizes. It wasn't his favorite work, but he hadn't known the animals that died, and his cats had to eat. It took him two hours after the morning feeding to get the contents in the freezers and then he had to double-check the cages.

Jerry was throwing a never-ending fit over the hurricane, which was something he did with every large storm since Simon began working on the island. Escaped animals gave Jerry nightmares.

Indra paced his cage when Simon walked by. Storms excited the tiger. He could feel the change in the air just like Simon.

“Don’t worry, boy,” he told him. “During the storm, you get to hang out with me in the hut while the other cats play.” He scratched his head through the bars.

“Simon, could you give me a hand?” Roberto called over the radio. “I’m at the panther enclosure.”

If he’d said pens, Simon would have run over because that could mean an emergency, but since none of the panthers were in the enclosure, he walked his normal slow gait the few hundred yards it took to get to Roberto.

“Hey amigo,” Roberto called when he saw him. “I’m having trouble getting to the camera in the corner.” He pointed to the ladder he’d brought with him. “I should have grabbed the longer one.” Roberto was a short wiry man who could adjust an engine and the next moment figure out why the computer in the front office wasn’t working.

“I can do that,” Simon said with a large grin. He liked it when his height gave him an advantage others didn’t have because that meant he could help them solve a tall problem. Simon propped up the ladder. It groaned beneath his weight as he climbed to the top, reached for the camera, gave it a slight twist to release it from its mount, and carried it back down.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Roberto said with an equally large grin. “Yolanda told me to ask you to dinner tonight at our place. What do you think? I’ll give you a lift there and a ride home when you’re ready to leave.”

Simon checked the sky. He hated missing one of Yolanda’s home-cooked meals. She used better ingredients than Jerry paid for at the sanctuary and her food was extra delicious.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Roberto, I would like that. ”

Yolanda was the person who introduced Simon to the library for the first time and to Mrs. Miller. Yolanda was being tutored in English by her. Simon didn't know much about it, but Roberto had told him once that he and Yolanda didn't have their papers. When he asked what that meant, Roberto explained they were in the country illegally.

Simon didn't understand papers and why you couldn't go where you wanted to. His world consisted of living exclusively on the island, and much of normal life confused him. He also didn't know why Mrs. Yolanda had to learn English. Her language was beautiful to his ears, and they communicated just fine before she began studying. It was probably like him learning to read. The more you knew, the smarter you were. The only thing Simon saw wrong with this was Yolanda's cooking made her smart because she knew so much about making food taste good.

Roberto fiddled with the camera then handed it back to Simon to mount again. When that was done, Simon headed to the tiger enclosure to clean it before the weekend. He figured the storm would hit by then, and it wouldn't be needed, but he liked keeping them tidy.

He put on gloves and picked up the piles of poo before he washed the inside down with a power hose. Simon loved his job, even the cleaning. It was all part of taking care of the cats and they deserved whatever he could do for them .

He doubled back to the panther enclosure after he finished. It didn't need much work. There were currently only two panthers, and they had been raised together since they were cubs. They had had a third one, but, to the delight of the crowd who watched, the other two ganged up and killed it. Jerry was currently on the lookout for another one.

Simon stopped by the bobcat exhibit to check on them. They were the only cats that didn't get moved. They were a mated pair, and George, the male, was doing his best to produce more cubs. Jerry would be very happy if it happened because he didn't

record the births, and they were sold at a private auction. When Jerry had originally brought him to the sanctuary, it had broken his heart the first time cubs were taken away from their mother, but now he tried not to grow too attached to them.

Jerry's words always came back to haunt Simon: "Keep your head down and your mouth shut if you want to stay here. It's the best life someone like you could hope for. The world is not made for idiots."

Simon hated that word, but he hated most of the words Jerry called him. He only kept his head down because it helped the cats.

Finally, his day was done, and he went looking for Roberto. He found him with Jerry, who was yelling, "Someone needs to be here for the storm."

"He's only coming for a few hours, and I will bring him back later tonight," Roberto said. "I've been tracking it, and the storm won't hit for a few days."

"You're out of a job if that imbecile isn't here to handle the animals during the storm." Jerry stomped off, giving Simon a mean look until he tripped over a branch on the ground. He swore and didn't look back after he righted himself.

"That went better than expected," Roberto said when he noticed Simon. "Are you ready?"

Simon looked around for Yolanda.

"She hopped on the boat with the guys who delivered the meat. She wanted to make something special tonight. She'll be waiting for us with a hot meal and a cold drink," he said in his lightly accented English. He learned to speak English as a child because his parents worked at a resort on the coast. Yolanda worked in the kitchens, and that was where they met. He told funny stories about teaching Yolanda English and how

they ended up fighting. So now she went to Mrs. Miller for instruction, and they were able to keep their happy marriage intact.

Simon liked hearing about their life away from the sanctuary. It wasn't that he wanted to leave because he absolutely did not, but he liked the idea of family, even though he knew it would never come true for him personally. Indra and the other cats were his family.

Simon stepped onto the boat and his stomach tightened like it always did. He had never learned to swim so boats weren't his favorite. His size was also a problem. The boat sank deeper into the water with Simon's weight. He sat on the wooden bench facing the front. The slightly choppy water would get worse by the next day. The trip took twenty minutes because Roberto only went as fast as needed for a smooth ride. If he went too slow, the waves would slam the boat around.

As promised, the food was delicious. Yolanda's carnitas were as good as Simon knew they would be. The black bean and rice side dishes were equally as tasty and Simon was glad he came. Yolanda pushed seconds and then thirds on him. He worried he might need to loosen his belt. The three of them laughed and talked about a car Roberto was rebuilding for a friend. The light conversation changed to something more serious after dinner while Yolanda cleared the table. She refused Simon's help.

"You talk to Roberto and I work," she insisted in her heavy accent that Simon loved. She often got words wrong but neither of the men would dare tell her.

"I heard about the two new cats going to hunters," Roberto said. They had never spoken about the hunters before. It was the unspoken secret that they all knew.

"The storm delayed it," Simon replied carefully .

"Does it bother you?" Yolanda asked in her halting English as she gathered plates.

“Jerry needs money to take care of the cats. I don’t like it, but he has the brains, and I listen to him.”

“Jerry has more money than he knows what to do with,” Roberto argued.

“If he doesn’t take the hunt money, more cats will die. They have medical expenses too,” Simon argued.

Roberto looked him straight in the eyes. “You seriously don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” Simon asked.

Roberto stood and thanked his wife for the dinner. “You and I need to take a ride,” he told Simon.

Simon followed him to his beaten-up old car and got in. Roberto pulled out and started driving.

“Jerry has everyone involved with the sanctuary under his thumb, and he lies about everything. He doesn’t need the money. He inherited millions when his father died and his wife brought him more money when they married. You’ll see in a few minutes.”

They drove to a nice area with oceanfront homes, and Roberto kept driving. A few minutes later, he pulled into a driveway that was blocked by a large wrought-iron fence. The home behind the fence was one of the biggest Simon had ever seen. It had three stories and looked like something a king would live in.

“This is Jerry’s house. He lives two lives. He’s the rich entrepreneur, and he’s the brains behind the illegal success of the Sanctuary. He’s been involved in the wild animal trade for decades and so was his father before him. Don’t fool yourself into

believing he cares about the island or any of us. If he's caught, we'll take the fall, and he will walk away clean."

Simon hadn't taken his eyes off the mansion. He liked his room in the hut, but he knew most people would see it as a hovel. The bugs, mostly roaches, along with the occasional snake, didn't bother him. But this? Jerry's home would have room for them all. Simon thought Jerry was poor, or maybe not rich. He knew Jerry didn't like the cats, but Simon thought it was fear. Now he was rethinking everything about his boss. Simon didn't handle these types of things well because they messed up his orderly routine.

"I need to go home," he told Roberto, desperate to return to the hut and allow his mind to settle. If he ran into Jerry right now, it wouldn't be good. So many cats suffered because of the bad things Jerry did. Simon had always looked at the good of the many as being more important than the good of a few. He thought this way because he didn't have a choice. Now he'd learned it had all been a lie.

"I'm sorry about this, Simon," Roberto said. " You deserve better."

Did he? Simon wasn't sure.

Chapter Nine

Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

The shrill blare of the alarm blasted throughout the entire school announcing morning bible study, waking Misty from a deep sleep. Her entire body ached. Yesterday, Mrs. Turney had decided to address Misty's stubbornness over her refusal to marry by following her around and pointing out everything Misty did wrong. The cane landing across her back caused stinging pain along with mental shame that she was treated this way. When the horrible school day was over, trash cleanup was added to Misty's kitchen duties.

Misty learned in the first week that both Mrs. Turney and Mrs. Sanders picked on someone different each day. You had to make it through and if you cried out or objected in any way, the punishments grew worse. The only girl outside this routine was Paige. The older women singled her out daily and it never seemed to let up. Paige always suffered silently but she couldn't hide the fury in her eyes and sometimes it increased the punishments. Paige never complained about it either although her plans to escape stayed in the forefront.

Due to her aches and pains, Misty had barely slept. She longed to roll over and go back to sleep. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. When she stood, even the bottoms of her feet were sore from being on them so much the previous day.

She had made her decision during the night. Misty would leave with Paige. She was not going to marry an old man, nor was she going to stay at the home and take abuse.

At breakfast, Mrs. Sanders made an announcement. “There is a large storm moving in, and we need to secure this building. The plywood for covering the windows is located in the storage shed along with tools. The lower windows must be covered first. We have a rolling platform for the upper floors that must be put together so you can reach the second and third-floor windows. During the storm, we will stay in the chapel and pray for the safety of our families.”

The girls looked at each other, and then Sarah, one of the youngest at the home, found the courage to ask a question. “If it’s dangerous for our families, why aren’t we evacuating the school?”

Mrs. Turney struck Sarah from behind with her cane, hitting her repeatedly on her back and shoulders sending Sarah to her knees. “God protects those who deserve His protection,” she yelled. “You do not question our commands. Your job as a woman is to follow the path the Lord bids for you and to sacrifice.”

Sarah cried loudly and maybe a little melodramatically. No one offered comfort because it would only bring punishment down on them. The repercussions Sarah faced for asking the question they were all thinking left Misty questioning everyone’s safety, especially that of her little brother. Storms scared him, and Misty knew her father would not leave their home. They didn’t have a cellar. Her mother had outfitted a closet with supplies and she would fill their home’s two bathtubs for emergency water while they squeezed into the tight confines to suffer while the storm raged.

At church, they would announce the names of anyone who died during the storm, and even then, Misty hadn’t questioned God’s will. Now, she doubted everything she had grown up believing and wished Mrs. Sanders had not mentioned the danger to those outside the school.

From Misty’s perspective, the Lord didn’t seem to care what happened to the girls forced to live in this horrible place with her. The cruelty and abuse she had suffered

over the past few weeks was changing her mind about many things. Paige helped too. Her thoughts and ideas weren't as outlandish as they first seemed.

No matter her aches and pains, Misty worked beside the other girls to secure the school against the impending hurricane. The gathering clouds grew darker, and the wind picked up making the arduous task worse.

The platform ladder wasn't in the best shape. They put it together, and the girls took turns climbing up and hammering the boards into place. It wobbled horribly and the biting wind added to the danger. Misty almost fell off when it was her turn and she had never been so happy to finish a chore in her life. Unfortunately, the next girl, Gale, wasn't as lucky. The sound of her leg snapping when she fell was one of the worst things Misty had ever heard.

"Step back," yelled Mrs. Sanders, trying to be heard over Gale's screams.

The girls moved away, and Mrs. Turney and Mrs. Sanders took over until it was time to move Gale to her room.

"What about a doctor or the hospital?" Sarah asked, the stubborn look back in her eyes .

She received a quelling glare from the administrators, and fortunately, they were too busy to discipline her. Misty had no doubt they would make up for it later.

"The Lord provides what you girls need. She will be fine in her room," Mrs. Turney said dismissively.

They all knew this wasn't true. They had heard, then seen, the damage to Gale's leg. Mrs. Turney called out names to help move Gale. Everyone not helping was to go to the cafeteria when the last of the boards was in place. Paige went up the platform

ladder twice to hurry it up.

Unlike at meals, they formed small groups when they got to the cafeteria. Misty and Paige moved two chairs to a corner. Paige wasn't liked by the other girls, and when Misty had befriended her, it had put Misty on the outs too. They were both surprised when Sarah brought a chair to their corner and sat it down beside them.

"I know you're leaving here," she said, looking straight at Paige. "I'm going with you."

"How do you know that?" Paige asked, her expression stony.

"I watch you. I know you take food from the kitchen, and it's always something easy to store that will last. I'm not stupid," Sarah replied confidently.

Paige looked at Misty. "Can we trust her?"

Misty turned to Sarah. "Why do you make them punish you?"

She shrugged. "I get punished no matter what I do." She smiled, her chipped tooth noticeable. "The only person they pick on more is Paige. They did this to my tooth." She smiled wide. "My mother and father visited me last month and said a man would overlook my imperfect teeth, but he would not overlook a wife who didn't obey." She shrugged again. "I'm not going home."

"It won't be easy on the street and your theatrics when you're punished won't work out there," Paige warned.

"The loud crying and moaning?"

"Yes, that."

Sarah's smile grew and a spark lit her eyes. "I want to be an actress. I work on roles every chance I get. The cane hurts but I found they lighten up when I make a bigger scene." She shrugged. "It's not easy in here, and it definitely wasn't easy at my house."

Paige looked back at Misty. "We could use the help."

Misty gave a slight nod rather impressed with Sarah.

"You're in," Paige declared, "but if you tell anyone, I'll beat your ass."

"You'll try," said the younger girl, who was at least six inches shorter than the older two.

Paige gave her a look, and Misty was sure Sarah had just ruined her chances of going with them.

"I like you," Paige finally said. "You've got guts, and even though you're a scrawny thing, you'll do okay on the street."

"When are we going?" Sarah asked eagerly.

"As soon as the storm arrives," Paige replied, sealing their pact with fist bumps.

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon didn't sleep that night. Thoughts of Jerry lying about money kept him awake. The horrible things he made Simon do allowed the newfound hatred to grow. The hunts were the worst. Simon replayed each death in his head. His cats were living, breathing, and beautiful creatures. The hunters had zero compassion, only wanting the trophy. Even though the island had an area that made hunting more realistic, the cats never stood a chance. They ran terrified from the hunters and died in fear with a bullet through the heart if they were lucky. Simon had heard the suffering cries when the bullet only wounded. His hatred grew a bit more.

Selling the cubs was horrible too. To help bond with the new owners, the cubs were taken away before they were ready. The cries of the babies were heard until they cleared the island. The mothers mourned for days and sometimes weeks, their grief breaking Simon's heart. A lion died because she developed an infection in one of her milk glands due to the separation from her cubs. Simon hated that rich people thought having a wild animal was cool.

He would never get the live chicken feedings out of his head again. There were so many things wrong with the sanctuary, and he, Simon, the one who loved the cats so much, was part of it.

His foggy brain couldn't shut off even when faint rays of light came from outside. He hit his palm against his head several times.

"Think, Simon, think," he said aloud.

He'd never questioned anything Jerry told him. He knew Jerry was a rotten person, but he also saw him as the savior who had taken him off the streets when Simon was the most desperate. On top of room and board, Jerry gave him a twenty-dollar allowance each week. Simon ate free in the cafeteria and had few expenses. When he went to the city, he shopped at thrift stores, though he had to get lucky to find things in his size. What once seemed strange when Jerry apologized that he couldn't pay Simon more, made sense now. Jerry could afford to pay more but he didn't see Simon as worthy of more.

Simon thought Jerry had given him a good life.

Jerry had not.

He made the cats suffer.

Jerry was worse than a bad person, but Simon didn't know the right word and he didn't know what he could do about any of it. His brain worked slower than other people but when he thought of a problem long enough, he could usually solve it. What Simon did know was that he couldn't live without his cats.

The storm would hit the following afternoon. It was a category three, but they expected it at a four when it hit land. Simon knew that all hurricanes were bad and this one might be worse than others. They had boards for the windows, and he worked with Roberto to get them secured.

"Yolanda and I won't be here tomorrow," Roberto said. "She made you an overabundance of meals. They're in the small freezer in the hut. If the power goes out, be sure to turn on the backup generator."

"I will, Mr. Roberto."

“I know you will, Simon, it just relieves my mind to go over everything with you. It’s me getting old, and I know you’ll keep the cats safe. I’ll see you as soon as we can get back to the island. ”

“You be careful too,” Simon told him.

“If it looks bad, we’ll go to the local school. They always have emergency beds and supplies set up. We’ll be fine. It’s the island that could take some damage.”

Simon grunted. He’d survived many storms. He would survive this one.

Roberto left and Jerry caught up with him.

“You know the rules, Simon. Keep the animals safe and be sure the island stays in one piece. I pay you for this.” He frowned at the dark sky. It was only four in the afternoon, and there was little visibility. Jerry’s usually nervous behavior was in overdrive. He turned a hard gaze back to Simon. “I would hate for some hunter to pay for a docile tiger to mount on his wall.”

Simon didn’t believe his hatred for Jerry could grow larger. He had just threatened the only family Simon had. He lifted his hand and ran it through his hair. His fingers shook with the need to wrap them around Jerry’s throat.

He did nothing and simply watched as Jerry walked to the dock. Everyone who worked on the island pitched in with rides to shore or brought back needed items. Not Jerry. He never helped anyone but himself.

Simon stewed. When the boat was out of sight, he went to Indra’s pen.

“Hey, boy,” he said as he unlocked the gate. “You’re free. I’ll let the others out tomorrow, but you can sleep in the hut tonight.” He hadn’t planned to release Indra

until the following day, but Simon needed comfort.

The large tiger stirred up the other cats, but he stayed at Simon's side while he did his last rounds of the night. The following day would be busy. With Indra on the bed with him, he managed to catch up on the sleep he missed the night before.

When Simon woke up in the morning, he could hear the wind outside.

"I'll take you out to do your business, and then you'll need to stay in here while I release the other cats. Come on." He shoved the tiger gently to get him off the bed before he walked to the door and opened it. He did his business outside too. They were alone, and it didn't matter to anyone else. This also let the other cats know this was his territory. Letting them out was risky but Simon had done it for years with only a few minor problems and those were usually hunting down a cat reluctant to return to the pens.

A strong wind blew and it would get worse. The clouds blocked much of the sun as the storm built in the distance. Indra walked away to find a private spot. Simon went looking for him after ten minutes. Indra sat near the cafeteria, watching the cove. Simon followed his gaze, and his heart nearly stopped.

Jerry's boat was docked, which meant he was at the sanctuary .

"We need to hide you," said Simon. "Come on, hurry."

The tiger followed him. Indra hated Jerry, maybe more than Simon did. It wouldn't be good if Jerry ran into them. He secured the cat in the hut and went to see why the boss was back. The storm had worsened, and it surprised him that Jerry would return with the ocean so rocky. He found him in his office. There were two men with him and their camouflage outfits gave away who they were.

“We were just coming to see you,” Jerry said after he looked up with a cheesy smile that was strictly for the hunters. “These two decided the adventure of a hunt during a hurricane couldn’t be missed. I need you to release the two females.”

The men’s heavily bearded faces gave little away. They each had a large hunting knife on their belts. Simon saw no sign of the hunting rifles and assumed they were still on the boat. Jerry never gave the names of the hunters. Their shrewd eyes watched Simon closely. Hunting the lions was highly illegal and they were doing their best to intimidate. Simon could squash them like bugs and not even breathe hard. His gaze returned to Jerry and that’s when he noticed stacks of one hundred dollar bills on the desk. His rage grew and he clamped his fists at his sides so he didn’t take a swing. Simon had never been violent but that’s all his thoughts were about right now.

Jerry, completely oblivious, turned back to the two men. “He’ll release the lions and we’ll give them thirty minutes to hide before you hunt if that works for you.”

One of the men cocked his head. “The thrill would be higher if we waited until dark.”

Jerry kept his smile intact. “I’ve been on this island for over thirty years,” he said. “It’s suicide to be here once the storm hits. Parts of the island will flood and there are mudslides not to mention the power goes out regularly. If we don’t get out of here in time, we’ll be stuck and it’s unsafe.”

That Jerry would have any idea what happened on the island during storms was ridiculous. He’d never stayed to see. Yes, the power went out along with phone access and trees toppled. Sometimes there was damage to the buildings. That was it. No mudslides. Jerry was a liar and Simon wanted to shout it at the two men. He stopped himself because they were as evil as Jerry.

“While we wait,” Jerry continued. “I’ll show you the map so you can see where the

animal pens are that you need to stay away from and the basic topography of the island. When that's done, you can grab your weapons from the boat." He looked at Simon. "What are you waiting for, you moron? Move your ass and let those animals out."

Simon turned and exited the office. He had to stand outside for a moment to gain control of his breathing. Images of the two new cats flashed in his mind. He couldn't let this happen again. It felt like a bolt of lightning went through his head and his vision blurred with every step he took away from Jerry until he stumbled. When he stood upright, his eyes landed on the boat. The only boat.

He approached the dock and saw the weapons cases on board. It took less than a minute to unhook the rope holding the boat to the dock and toss it into the water. Using his foot, he pushed the craft away. When he was sure the men couldn't get to it, he went to the cat pens. He stopped in front of Carla and Tibby's cage door and unlocked it.

"I evened the odds for you and you have a chance now. If you mistake Jerry for one of the hunters, that's okay."

The cats growled.

He opened their door wide and stayed behind it while the cats figured out that they could leave. It took about ten minutes. He expected Jerry to charge over, yelling, but it didn't happen. Carla came out first. She sniffed around, growled at him, and walked away. Tibby ran after her, and Simon watched as they disappeared into the jungle. He would give them extra help too. He opened the other lion cages before he went to the four tigers and then the panthers to free them. He also let out the mountain lion. It had also been raised as a pet, but it turned on its owner and killed him. Jerry paid very little for him.

The cats didn't harm each other when they were loose on the island but they didn't like normals which Simon counted on. The other plus was Simon had no fear of his family and he could move freely around the island without being in danger.

He walked back toward the hut and ran into a frantic Jerry and the two men.

"My boat. It's out there," Jerry said pointing. "Move your dumb ass and swim for it," he yelled.

"I can't swim," Simon said honestly. He'd always been afraid of the water.

"You stupid fool, you get that boat back for me, or you'll be looking for a new job."

Simon turned his back and walked away.

"Where do you think you're going?," Jerry yelled frantically. "We can't stay here. Their weapons are on that boat."

Simon turned and studied the two men for a moment before he spoke to Jerry. "The cats are out. I always let them out during storms."

"What?" Jerry shrieked, his voice high enough to almost burst an eardrum. "All of them?"

Simon kept walking but turned after a few feet. "They're hungry. I wouldn't stay out here in the open if I were you."

"You're fired," Jerry yelled. "I'll see you go to prison for this." He took his phone from his pocket and hit the numbers frantically. A few seconds later, he cursed again and threw it into the sand.

“If one of those cats comes near me, I’ll kill it,” he yelled at Simon’s retreating back.

Jerry shouldn’t have returned to the island. He shouldn’t take money from hunters who kill the cats to put their heads on a wall, and he shouldn’t have lied about being poor for all these years.

Simon whistled a happy tune.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

“You will return to your rooms and await dinner,” Mrs. Sanders said. “Gale is comfortable, and a doctor will examine her as soon as the storm passes.”

“What do we do?” Sarah whispered to Paige.

“Go to your room and wait. After dinner, I’ll come get you when it’s time.”

“How?” Sarah’s voice was a low hiss now.

“If you want to come with us, you need to trust me. I have everything planned.”

Mrs. Sanders clapped her hands, and there was no more time to talk. Misty hadn’t known that Paige had collected food for their escape. Misty had never thought about it. She would need to trust Paige’s plan because she herself didn’t have one of her own.

Waiting in her room was nerve-wracking. The storm built outside, and Misty didn’t see how they could escape with the weather getting worse. The thought of never seeing her brother again scared her senseless. She wasn’t sure if she should go.

It wasn’t until she was washing her hands and saw the bruises on them that her mind changed. She could feel every ache in her body from the endless beatings and work. Somehow she would find a way to see her brother again. Maybe he would join her on the grand adventure she planned to have after they escaped. She did everything she could to turn her foreboding into excitement.

Dinner was their normal bland food. She would have time to speak with Paige and find out what was happening when they did the cleanup. Misty heard a gagging noise and turned to Paige, who was in the seat beside her. Paige's head thankfully swung away from Misty because she vomited on the floor. Several girls quickly scooted their chairs away from the mess. Misty's gut went queasy at the sight and smell of the contents of Paige's stomach.

"Why didn't you say you were ill?" Mrs. Turney demanded.

"Don't feel good," Paige moaned while grasping her stomach and weaving back and forth in her chair.

"Sarah, your mouth has been running nonstop. Get over here and clean this mess up. Misty, help Paige to her room and then come back to eat your dinner."

Misty's heart sank at the thought of Paige being sick. They wouldn't be running during the storm. She couldn't believe how discouraged she felt after trying to talk herself out of leaving.

"Come on, lean on me," she told Paige, who stumbled slightly and clasped her hand on Misty's arm.

They left the dining hall and thankfully the smell. Misty doubted she would eat what was left of her food. She hadn't been hungry anyway.

Paige's weight against her lessened, and Misty stopped.

"I'm not sick," Paige whispered. "I put my finger down my throat when no one was watching. It's part of the plan. I'm sorry you will have kitchen duty alone. I have things to do."

Misty couldn't believe it. She'd fallen for Paige's play-acting.

"I thought you were really sick," Misty complained.

"That's what you were supposed to think. I just feel bad that Sarah had to clean the mess. Tell her to wait in her room calmly and not to do anything stupid like get into trouble. I'll come get you both around midnight."

"What about the locked doors?" Misty asked.

"I've got it covered. Don't worry about anything. Once we're out of here, we'll be running, and that's when the real fun starts."

Misty didn't feel good about the real fun. She had to trust Paige, though, or the only way she would get out of here was by agreeing to marry the old man. She left Paige at her room and returned to the dining hall.

She moved the food on her plate around without eating.

"You will be punished for not finishing the food on your plate," Mrs. Sanders said from behind her.

"I'm not feeling well," Misty complained and placed her hand on her stomach.

"Sarah can help you in the kitchen. Whatever Paige has must have passed to you. We can't afford for the entire school to get sick."

"Yes, Mrs. Sanders," Misty said.

When dinner was over, Sarah helped her clear the table, and then they began the long process of scrubbing dishes. It usually took two hours. Misty told Sarah what Paige

said.

“She faked that perfectly. I had no idea,” Sarah said with a laugh.

“She felt bad that you had to clean it.”

“Yeah, that was gross, but if it helps the cause, I’m good. ”

Misty knew very little about Sarah. “How old are you?” she asked.

“Eleven. I’ll be twelve in a few months.”

“Eleven?” Misty thought her small for her age and had no idea Sarah was so young.

“What did you do to get sent here?”

“My mom got remarried. My stepfather is very strict, and I have a smart mouth. My mother thinks I try to make him angry but believe me, it’s him. My mom is weak and she can’t survive without a man telling her what to do and how to do it. We didn’t have a lot of money, but we had enough to keep going. The church arranged her marriage. Now she’s pregnant, and my stepfather sent me here to improve my behavior before the baby is born.” Sarah gave Misty a steady look. “What did you do?”

Misty lifted a plate from the sink and scrubbed the stuck on food. “I won’t marry the old pastor from our church. He’s as gross as the vomit.”

Sarah laughed. They spent the remainder of cleanup time getting to know each other, and Misty decided Sarah was pretty cool, and she was happy to have her with them.

“She said midnight,” Misty whispered before they went their separate ways.

“I’ll be waiting,” Sarah replied. This late at night was the only time they weren’t escorted through the school.

Both girls smiled.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon slapped his palm against the side of his head. What had he done? His life with the cats was over. He owed them so much and now he wouldn't be able to help them. Simon paced the hut, up one side, down the other. How could he take this back?

Looking around, he decided he would need to leave the island as soon as the storm passed. If the police didn't get him first. Where would he go? He didn't want to get Roberto and Yolanda in trouble too, so he couldn't go to them.

The cats might eat Jerry and the hunters. That part didn't make him feel bad. Those men deserved it. The cats did not. They would be put down.

Smack.

His palm hit his head again. It didn't help, but he'd done it since he was a child whenever he felt stupid. Think!

Indra, sensing something was up, walked over and rubbed his body alongside Simon's thigh.

"We need to collect the cats," he told Indra. "Well, I do. You'll only make it harder."

Simon now had a plan, and it was something he could do. His temper got the best of him, and that hadn't happened in years. He could fix this. He went to the cabinet that held the tranquilizer rifle and turned the lock, saying the numbers aloud while he entered the combination. After loading the rifle, he placed several extra darts in his

pocket.

Lightning exploded, and the power went out. He would need to activate the smaller generator to keep the lighthouse going and the main generator for everything else. He placed the strap of the rifle over his shoulder and swung it around to his back.

“You can go with me to start the generators,” he told Indra. “Afterward, I’ll bring you here to stay until I have the cats back in their cages. I have a good treat that you’ll enjoy if you behave.”

Simon talked to Indra like this all the time. He swore the tiger understood at least half of what he said. Simon had no doubt his owner had loved and taken good care of him, even though he understood that was rarely the case. He had seen too many injured and emaciated cats brought in from private owners. Indra had gotten lucky, or had until they sent him here. Jerry used his love for Indra against him, and it would only get worse.

He opened the front door to a blast of wind that almost took it off its hinges. Indra had no problem going out into the light rain. Simon lifted his head and looked at the sky. It was growing darker, and soon there would be little visibility. He decided on the generator at the lighthouse first. Dried palm fronds dropped from trees and swirled around in the wind until they crashed to the ground. Simon put his head down, pulled the hood of his jacket higher, and headed toward the lighthouse. Indra scampered after several fronds and made a game of it.

Usually, Simon would smile at his antics, but right now, he was more worried about what would happen after the storm. He tromped forward against the wind, muttering to himself about his stupidity. The path became more treacherous the farther they traveled into the inner island. This area was untamed, and the likelihood of stumbling on one of the loose cats was fairly high. Indra wouldn’t attack the other cats on his own, but he might to defend Simon. Indra was big enough to take care of himself, so

Simon decided not to worry about it.

They hit a rocky area with a small trail that led around to the door. Simon took out his keys and fiddled with the lock until it opened. He had always liked the lighthouse. He occasionally came here when he needed peace. He'd brought Indra with him several times.

A small closet beside the door held the generator. Simon wheeled it out, lifted a rolling partial door, and slipped it outside so the fumes wouldn't fill the interior of the lighthouse when he started it. There was a shelter above the area to protect the generator too. Now he had to go outside and pull the starter cord. Indra simply sat watching and licking his paws.

A heavier rain hit Simon's head when he went out. The motor balked on the first two attempts but started on the third. He situated the generator so it was firmly on the cement slab before he walked back into the lighthouse. He locked the small generator door from the inside.

"Come on, boy, are you going to climb the stairs with me?"

Indra made a noise and jumped ahead, clearing the steps faster than Simon could run them. He followed the cat upward until they came to the lighthouse door. Simon opened the fuse box beside it and turned off the main breaker before he flipped the one to the generator that ran the high-powered light. The sudden strobe flash coming from beneath the door told Simon everything was working .

He sat with his back to the quickly warming door and pulled a baggie of chips from his pocket. They were crushed slightly. He took the largest he could find and passed it to Indra. The tiger delicately licked it from his palm with his rough tongue.

"I made a mistake, boy, and I'm sorry for it," he said as he ran his hand over Indra's

head.

The tiger made a huffing sound when his body settled beside Simon, and he looked at the bag waiting for more.

“I wasn’t sure you would like them. Here’s another.” Simon plopped one in his mouth after Indra ate his. “I may need to leave you when the storm is over. It’s my fault, and I don’t know what will happen to you.” Simon lowered his face into Indra’s fur and inhaled. He had to do something to save his friend. He knew Indra would suffer and it was all his fault.

They finished the bag of chips, but Simon wasn’t ready to go. He and Indra cuddled together and shared their warmth. Thunder followed by lightning made a racket outside, and Simon knew he couldn’t delay any longer. It was raining in sheets now, and rounding up the cats wouldn’t be easy. He had to get the main generator turned on first.

“Come on, boy, I have work to do, and I promised you a treat for good behavior.”

The storm was almost as loud as the generator when they went outside. Indra stayed close to Simon’s side. He knew Jerry wouldn’t go out with the cats loose and start the generator, so he made his way to the normal's area.

He struggled to get the large generator out of its shed because the bottom lip to the door was three inches tall. He made a grunt when he pushed it over the lip. There was also an outdoor shelter, and he moved the generator under it. This one started on the first crank.

He turned, and a flashlight blinded him.

“Did you get those animals back into the pens?” Jerry demanded. Indra gave a low

growl, and the flashlight jerked until it landed on him. Jerry backed up slowly, the light trembling now.

“Where are the hunters?” Simon asked, ignoring Jerry’s question. In all the years he’d worked at the sanctuary, he had never treated Jerry this way but Simon knew he deserved it.

“Those crazy idiots decided to take on the wildlife with their knives. They’re out in the storm.”

Ice-water traveled through Simon’s veins.

“Did you get the animals put up?” Jerry repeated.

“No.”

The flashlight went to Simon and then to Indra. “If you get them penned, I won’t fire you, but there will be consequences for what you’ve done. The hunters will most likely want their money back. Maybe they’ll get lucky and kill one of the smaller cats. If they’re happy with that, we may get to keep half the money. The cats need to eat.”

Simon glared, which did absolutely nothing. Jerry cared about Jerry. He turned and left Jerry standing there. Indra gave another low growl and followed him.

They were about two hundred yards away when Simon stopped.

“Did you hear that?” He could barely see Indra right beside him, the rain was falling so hard. The sound came again.

A scream.

A girl's scream.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Bridge Home School for Girls, Misty

Waiting for midnight was the hardest part of the escape plan, or so Misty thought. She went between regretting she'd agreed to go and being angry she hadn't left already. Mostly, she was terrified of being caught. What would the punishment be? She couldn't see them, but she knew she had bruises on her back from Mrs. Turney following her around and hitting her with the cane. The bruises on her fingers had faded, but they were still visible. Every girl at the school had some sort of detectable damage, even if it was only temporary.

Did her parents know what this place would be like? She had a feeling they did. Her job as their child was to obey. She'd failed.

Or, as her thinking changed, maybe they had failed her. Paige didn't believe in God and called it mythology. She'd said so many things that made sense and she made Misty think about the things that always bothered her. Women were born of Adam's rib and Paige called that the biggest lie.

"Babies come from a woman's womb. It's the only way they come. The church taught you the Adam's rib crap so you would think men were better. They teach you to obey and not to think for yourself. They feed you demeaning lies from the time you're a small child so you know nothing else. They isolate girls and women so you don't see or hear about the real world happening outside the church every day. Places like this school exist to stop girls from thinking because if we gain knowledge, we become stronger. There are horrible things in this world and if God is all powerful, he's also responsible. You can't have it both ways. Is it something you've thought about?"

She hadn't but Paige's words stuck with Misty. She believed in God but the how to believe was changing. She rolled over and counted the imperfections on the ceiling. A few minutes into her second round, she heard a small noise at the door. A scratch?

She sat up, and the door opened. Sarah ran in first, followed by Paige, who closed and locked the door behind her. She carried a large plastic garbage bag that looked heavy.

"This is the most dangerous part of my plan," Paige said and dumped the contents of the bag onto the bed. "I tried to match sizes as best I could and I found a flashlight for each of us."

Jeans, shirts, and jackets fell onto the bed.

"Where did these come from?" Misty asked.

"I figured they belong to the girls in here or the girls who have come through. They're kept in a closet by the nurse's room," Paige said.

"We have a nurse?"

"No, but there's a door that's labeled 'nurse' and we don't have time for these questions. If someone sees us sneaking out with these on, the game is up and we're caught. If that happens, run separate ways, and maybe one of us can escape."

"But what do I do if I'm the one who escapes?" Sarah asked.

"You run," Paige said. "Don't stop until you find someone you can rat this place out to. What they're doing here is illegal and they will be in big trouble."

Paige ruffled Sarah's hair. Sarah reared back and shook her head. "Don't do that," she said, her fearful eyes going hard.

“Gotcha,” Paige said and glanced at Misty. “What are we waiting for?”

They tore through the clothes, handing items to each other as they tried them on. The school supplied boots and socks that would help them stay warm, too.

“I couldn’t find rain ponchos, but the jackets will help. They were the ones I thought would keep the rain away as much as possible. I put snacks in the pockets. We’ll be able to find drinking water if we need it.”

“How did you find the clothes?” Misty asked.

“The same way I got into your rooms.” She lifted her hand and showed Misty a single key. “It’s a master key and unlocks every door in this place. Mrs. Sanders had an extra one hanging in her office. She got called away, and I took it.”

“And she didn’t notice it missing?”

Paige shrugged. “There were other keys there, and I moved one over, so it looked like the master. She never noticed, and I’ve been walking the halls at night while the rest of you sleep. I found the clothes and also some money.”

“How much?” Sarah asked.

“Enough to keep us from working for a few weeks. We’ll need to be frugal, but we can do this. First, we need to get away, though. A huge crash of thunder sounded outside, and they could hear the rain hitting the roof.

“We need to hurry and be gone before the lights go out. Someone will come down and start the generator, and I don’t want them catching us.”

The girls dressed in record speed. Paige placed pillows beneath Misty’s bed sheet, the

only bedding she'd been allowed so far. Misty had folded the sheet in half to keep warm at night. Paige then placed her finger to her lips. "Walk softly and no talking. We won't need the lights until we're clear of the house. I know the best way out."

The girls followed Paige as she led them to what looked like a closet but was actually a stairway up to the attic. There was a landing outside a small door at the back of the attic that opened to the outside metal stairs. They were the same ones Misty had seen when she'd arrived at the home. The wind was blowing so hard they had to hold the handrails and walk slowly because the stairs were slippery from the rain.

Paige made it first and turned on her flashlight. "Follow me," she said.

"Did you go outside at night too?" Misty asked loudly so she could be heard over the storm.

"Yes, and I explored as far as I could."

"You never sleep," Sarah said. "No wonder you're so grumpy."

"Stop gagging and hurry," Paige urged.

They followed the road that Misty had arrived on the first night at the school. The rain pelted them, and they held onto each other, walking in a single file line.

"If you see the lights on a car, we need to hide, but I doubt anyone is out tonight. Just a bit further and we can get off the road."

They walked for maybe another hundred yards, and Paige pointed them to a small path.

"This leads to another road that leads to the river, and the river leads to the ocean. It's

easier to stay lost near the water where there are always families vacationing. Those families are easy money too.”

Misty had no idea what Paige was talking about. She was shivering from the cold, and her wet socks squished in her boots, which made her more miserable. They couldn’t stop now, but Misty was second-guessing leaving during a hurricane.

“I, I, need to turn on my flashlight,” Sarah said.

“Go ahead.” Paige didn’t seem as cold as the other two girls.

The extra light helped, and they moved faster, which helped a bit with warmth, or so Misty told herself. Water poured down the trail, and the dirt quickly turned to mud. Misty took a step and lost her footing. She landed on her butt and started sliding.

“Whoa,” said Paige and made a grab for her.

“You should let me slide down. It would be faster,” Misty complained.

Lightning lit up the sky followed by thunder a few seconds later.

“That lightning was close,” Paige said. “We need to keep pushing. We can’t give up now.”

They moved faster. An explosion in the distance startled them all .

“Lightening hit a tree,” Paige yelled. “Keep moving. There’s another road not far from here.”

The hurricane was early in the season and spring was warm but not summer warm. With the rain and wind, the temperature was dropping. Misty couldn’t stop shaking.

Her pants were now soaked, too. The wind made her stumble, and she almost took Sarah down. Paige remained unflappable and pushed forward like a superhero.

“See up there,” she said and pointed ahead. “There’s a bus stop with an overhang that will give us a chance to regroup.” Paige pulled both their hands and led them to the partial shelter.

She went to the very back and sat down, bringing Misty and Sarah in beside her.

“Cuddle in close for warmth,” she said.

With their hands in the middle, they formed a half-circle. Paige rubbed Misty’s fingers and Sarah’s to bring the circulation back. When she finished, she pulled a candy bar from her pocket.

“Turns out Mrs. Sanders is a candy junkie. There was an entire box in her desk drawer. The sugar will give us energy, and we all need to eat one. I put several in your jacket pockets. Fish them out.”

Cold and miserable, Misty pulled out one of her bars. She slowly peeled back the wrapper and took a bite. It tasted wonderful.

“I haven’t had candy in a long time,” said Sarah before she shoved the rest of the bar in her mouth .

Misty ate slower and savored every bite.

“Run,” yelled Paige as lights flashed into the bus stop.

Escape, Misty

The firetruck slowly rolled past, the lights blinding them in their hiding spot among the bushes. Even with the bright lights, visibility was nil and Misty didn't think they'd been seen.

"They're probably checking on the people who didn't evacuate," Paige whispered. "We need to keep moving and it will help us stay warm."

Misty didn't think she would ever be warm again. She no longer felt her toes though there was a slight burning sensation when she walked. Completely miserable, she slogged along behind Sarah, who made slight whimpering sounds, but didn't stop or put her complaints into words. The rain fell harder, adding to their misery, but they didn't stop.

"That's the river," Paige said, pointing ahead. "We follow it and I'll find us a place to get warm." For the first time, there was a slight shiver in Paige's voice.

They lowered their heads and moved forward. Water dripped past Misty's jacket collar and rolled down her back. She wanted to cry.

"We've got this," Paige encouraged.

They continued on until the sound of the river meeting the ocean was louder than the storm. Misty didn't see a shelter of any kind. There were houses in the distance, but they were too big and fancy. The first thing the owners would do if they saw them was call the police. Her heart dropped. Had this all been for nothing?

“Look out there,” Paige said, pointing beyond the shoreline.

Misty saw a blinking light in the distance.

“What is it?” asked Sarah.

“It’s where we’ll hide during the storm. The lighthouse will be warm and get us out of the rain.”

Misty looked at the light then back at the growing waves. “How do we get there?”

“That’s easy,” Paige said. “We steal a boat.”

“I don’t want to steal anything from anyone,” Misty said but really, she didn’t want to take a boat onto the water.

“The candy bars, the money I found, what do you think that was?” Paige countered .

Theft. Misty went silent while she tried to control her fear of getting into a boat.

“I’ll help steal a boat if we can get out of the cold,” Sarah said, her voice trembling harder.

She was right, and Misty felt she would die if she didn’t get warm. She looked at the large waves, and wondered if they would die. The main part of the hurricane wasn’t supposed to hit until dawn, but Misty couldn’t believe the waves could get higher. She followed Paige, who seemed to know where she was going. A short distance later, Misty heard a heavy knocking sound. It turned out to be boats hitting the dock.

How Paige knew which boat to choose was something Misty would never figure out. The girl had an unbelievable survival instinct.

“This one will do,” Paige declared.

Misty looked at the decrepit craft and didn’t share Paige’s confidence.

“It looks like it will sink,” Sarah said.

“It’s floating and has the key. It will get us to the island, and from there, it’s only a short distance to the lighthouse,” Paige assured.

Misty was too tired and cold to argue, and Sarah didn’t argue either. Paige seemed to know what she was doing as the other two girls climbed in and Paige untied the rope that held it to the dock. Surprisingly, the boat’s motor started up immediately, and the loud rumble could be heard over the storm .

“Hold on,” Paige yelled as they took off toward the lighthouse.

The boat took a beating from the waves. Cold water pelted the girls, and they were openly shivering now. Paige turned on a side light that lit the water in front of them. Misty’s stomach became queasy as the boat hit wave after wave. Sarah clung to her. Misty slid down so she was on the floor and wrapped her arms around Sarah. If the boat sank, they would be dead. This entire mad scheme was a horrible idea. Misty did what came natural and prayed.

Paige looked straight ahead, her eyes on their destination. It felt like their journey would never end. She slowed the boat, and Misty heard a grinding noise.

“There are jagged rocks that I need to get around. Don’t worry, I have this,” Paige said confidently.

A long grinding noise sounded again, and the boat tilted slightly as Paige navigated toward the rocky shore. There were jagged rocks on the shore too, and it didn’t look

inviting. Misty looked upward and saw the lighthouse. Paige said it offered warmth and a place to hide. It was too late to back out now. Misty just wanted to be warm.

“I did it,” Paige yelled.

Misty and Sarah whooped, their fists in the air, for only a moment their freezing situation forgotten. The rocky bottom stopped the boat from going forward and they came to a stop.

“We need to get wet now,” Paige said, which made Misty laugh when she looked down at the foot of water they had to trudge through.

All three looked like drowned rats as they dragged themselves to shore, the icy water lapping at their legs and threatening to pull them out in the swelling tide. They clung to each other during each agonizing step. They finally collapsed on the cold, wet land, the wind beating against them.

“I’m freezing,” Sarah said, shivering.

They wrapped their arms around each other as tightly as they could, but Misty didn’t feel any warmer.

“We need to move. It will be dry inside the lighthouse, I promise. Come on,” Paige said, standing and pulling Sarah up, then extending her hand to Misty. “The trees will keep the wind off us. Let’s go.”

They marched through the sand until they hit the tree line. Paige somehow found a path that made walking easier. The trees did block the wind, and though she was no warmer, Misty felt better. She focused on the lighthouse as her one true beacon in the night.

“What do we have here?” a thick male voice asked, and a large man stepped into their path.

He wore camouflage pants and jacket along with a huge knife on his belt which was all Misty’s eyes focused on at first. Paige shined her light on him. His clothes were as wet as theirs. He was tall with pitted skin on his face. Misty didn’t like the look of him.

“Our boat hit the rocks, and it was all we could do to make it to shore,” Paige beseeched in a melodic tone. “We were hoping someone was here that could help,” she said, her voice carrying an innocence Misty had never heard from her before.

“You ladies look cold,” the man observed, his hand held up against the light, but his gaze traveled over them, and Misty didn’t have a good feeling.

“Can you help us?” Paige asked in that same, unusual tone.

“I have a nice dry room I’m willing to share. Why don’t you come with me?” He held his hand out, but none of the girls moved closer. “I won’t bite, promise,” he said in a tone that caused chills to run up Misty’s spine.

She took Sarah’s hand and squeezed her fingers. They might need to run.

“Hey Dale, what did you find?” another male voice said from the trees before he too stepped onto the path, blocking their way. He was dressed identically to the first man. A little shorter, he carried the same look in his eyes as he examined them.

“These ladies are in distress. I thought we could help them back to our room and make them comfortable. I’m sure they’ll be grateful,” the first man who been called, Dale, said .

“You want to give up on the trophies?” the second man asked.

“Oh, I think we can have it all if we play our cards right. Let’s get these ladies warm, and we’ll go from there,” Dale suggested.

“That’s okay,” Paige said, her voice now hard. “We’ll find someone else to help us.”

Dale took a step toward Paige, and the girls backed up.

“You don’t want to be like that,” Dale said, grinning malevolently. “There are dangerous animals in these woods, and they would love to snack on such lovely treats. I’ll snack too, but I promise I won’t leave marks.”

Paige turned her head slightly. “Stand your ground,” she whispered, but not quietly enough, and the men heard.

The men came at them quickly. Paige turned and kicked out at the one that drew closest first. Misty had Sarah’s hand, and she was ready to run, but a low growl stopped her in her tracks, and she froze.

“Well, look at that,” the second man said. “You were right, we can have it all.” He drew the knife on his belt, and the flashlight glinted against the eight-inch blade.

“The girls make good bait,” said Dale. “I would stay very still if I were you,” he told them.

Misty wanted to run, but she was too afraid. She knew they couldn’t trust these men .

Dale walked around the girls and peered sharply into the darkness. “Here kitty kitty,” he whispered, crouching and waving the knife slowly in front of him. “Watch our flank, Baxter,” he said.

“We should run,” Sarah whispered.

“Something big is out there. The last thing you want to do is run,” Paige whispered back.

Misty had heard of peeing your pants because you were so scared, but she never really understood. Now she did. Her bladder felt heavy, and she was worried she would embarrass herself.

Something large sprang from the bushes, and Dale charged at the same time Sarah produced the most blood-curdling scream Misty had ever heard.

“Run!” shouted Paige.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

T error ran through Simon's veins as he moved through the forest. Indra ran ahead and disappeared. The scream had come from the direction of the lighthouse. Simon took the small road they used for transport. It divided into a rarely used path which was the quickest way. He hadn't heard the hunters speak. Maybe one of them had a high-pitched voice.

The rain wasn't at full hurricane force, but it came down in sheets and obscured the dense forest. Simon stumbled on a branch and tried to use his large hand to stop the fall. He failed and slipped a few feet in the mud before he was able to sit upright. Now was the hard part where he had to stand. His right knee hurt the worst, but they were both bad. After a deep inhale, he pushed up and groaned as his knees took his weight. He began moving again.

He stopped a few minutes later to listen. A man's voice came from a short distance away and Simon relaxed slightly, thinking the strange scream was one of the hunters.

"That damn cat almost got me. I sliced him though. We'll hunt the sucker down."

Simon would hurt them. He would find the cat and stitch him up. He saw red as his anger built. The other man's words stopped Simon in his tracks.

"I need to get out of this rain. Let's go after the girls first. The cat will die and we can find his carcass later. We'll have a trophy with only a little work."

The girls . Simon had heard a girl scream, and these men were the cause. He stayed

where he was and continued listening as the first man spoke again.

“I want to watch that cat bleed out. Better yet, I want its blood running down my hands when it dies. I’ve needed this for a long time. Man against nature and all that. This is what I’ve lived for and no girls, hurricane, or pack of cats will stop me. You go after the girls. Save one for me.”

Where the heck had the girls come from? The cats were loose on the island and girls were not allowed. Indra came out of the foliage and Simon ran his hand across the tiger’s back, keeping him close. Soft snarls came from the cat’s throat.

The hunters split up. Simon, sick with worry over the cat who was injured, made the decision to follow the man going after the girls. He couldn’t see him but could hear the noise he made on the trail, and that was over the sounds of the storm. How this man qualified as a hunter was beyond Simon’s comprehension. Had he ever watched big cats hunt? They were silent and stealthy. This was why these men paid so much money to go after the lions on the island. They had no idea what they were doing.

The man continued moving in the direction of the lighthouse. If there were girls looking for safety, the lighthouse door would be locked, and they wouldn’t be able to get inside. The hunter would catch them, and Simon knew his intentions were bad.

Girls were Simon’s worst nightmare and he wasn’t happy that he had to deal with the hunters, Jerry, and them, whoever they were. He had never been good around women. His large size scared them. The younger they were, the worse it was because they cried. Simon did everything he could to stay away from all females. Well, except Yolanda. She’d always treated Simon nicely.

The hunter veered off the path and Simon followed a short distance. The man’s movements became louder before he started cursing.

“Where the hell is the damn trail?”

He was lost, but Simon knew exactly where they were. If the girls went to the lighthouse, he could find them and help. Or should he? They wouldn't trust him and they would be scared. He changed course toward the actual trail. Trust or not, they were in the beginnings of a hurricane, and if he didn't help, they could die. It would be worse if they were attacked and eaten by one of the cats. The hunter could fend for himself.

When they moved far enough away from the man, Indra stopped growling. As they drew closer to the lighthouse, he growled again.

“Stay back, go,” one of the girls shrieked.

Simon moved faster. He came out of the tree line to the rocks that surrounded the lighthouse. Three girls stood, their backs against the door, staring down one of the lions who snarled at them, showing fangs. It was Gangus, a larger male who could be ornery.

Simon knew from studying lions for years that the cat was ready to attack. Its powerful hind legs sprung, and the girls screamed. The lion went airborne, and Indra came out of nowhere and rammed the dangerous male's side. They both rolled.

“Move out of the way,” Simon yelled. He shouldered past the girls, pulled out his keys, and unlocked the door. He pushed it open, grabbed one of the girls' arms, and shoved her inside. She held the hand of the other girl who, in turn, held the hand of the third. Simon heard another loud growl and turned slightly. Indra came towards him, and he shoved the girls harder so they were inside and could make room for him and Indra.

The girls screamed. Simon grabbed the scruff of the cat's neck and stopped him from

moving closer to them. He slammed the door, and the noise of the storm was cut off.

“He’s safe,” Simon said. “He won’t hurt you if you quiet down and don’t make sudden moves.”

Their eyes, filled with terror, didn’t leave Indra.

“It’s okay,” he told the tiger. “They won’t hurt you. They’re nice.”

“He’s a tiger,” one of the girls said.

“His name is Indra. He saved you. The lion outside would have killed you. They’re afraid of people and they don’t understand that you won’t hurt them.”

“He would have eaten us,” another of the girls accused.

Simon shrugged. “That’s natural. It’s not his fault.”

The third girl, younger and smaller than the other two, moved closer to Simon. Her wet hair trailed across her face, making her eyes look larger. Those eyes scanned him from head to foot and back up again. The two other girls did the same and Simon knew there would be tears and screaming within seconds.

“You’re bigger than the tiger,” the smaller one said with a touch of awe in her voice and a large grin.

It startled Simon. She sounded, well, almost nice.

“Indra is a Siberian Tiger, but he’s not as long as I am tall,” he said proudly.

“That’s cool. Can I pet him?” Her eyes left Simon and went back to the tiger.

“Sarah,” one of the girls said sternly.

Sarah turned her head. “He saved us from the mean lion. We can at least be nice.”

“What about the other two men?” the girl asked sharply.

Sarah glanced up at Simon. “Are you bad like those other men?”

“No. One is lost and the other went after one of my cats. I need to stop him.”

She stretched her hand out tentatively toward the tiger, and it surprised Simon when Indra moved closer to her and sniffed her fingers. She giggled.

“His whiskers are scratchy, but his nose is so soft.”

Indra obviously liked her. He moved even closer and almost knocked her over when he rubbed against her side.

Simon looked at all three of them. Their bedraggled appearance enhanced the fact they were freezing. Simon wore a black rain slicker that protected his upper extremities, but his pants were wet and covered in mud from his fall. He too was feeling the lowering temperature.

“You need to be warm,” he told the girls.

“Why should we trust you?” the angriest of the three asked.

He looked down at his feet and his voice lowered. “My name is Simon. I’m learning to read so I can be smart,” he raised his head and met each girl’s eyes. “I take care of the cats at the sanctuary. They’re my friends.”

For a moment, the girls stood frozen, but then one stepped forward and placed her hand out.

“Hi, Simon, I’m Misty. This is Paige,” she pointed to the angry girl. “And this is Sarah, your tiger’s new friend. We’re in trouble. Will you help us?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

“I ’ll take you to the hut,” Simon said. “There’s food, and you can get dry and keep Indra company while I round up the other cats. One is injured, and I may need to bring him back with me, but I promise you’ll be safe,” he added, glancing quickly at Sarah because she encouraged him with smiles, and he liked her. He might like Misty too, but he wasn’t sure about Paige. She didn’t smile, and she looked at him, not quite in fear, but in definite mistrust. The two new cat’s brought into the sanctuary had the same expression.

“Is it warm there?” Sarah asked, visibly shaking with chattering teeth.

Simon looked her straight in the eyes, something that usually made him uncomfortable. “It’s warm, I promise,” he said.

“Okay, can we hurry?”

Simon took off his rain slicker and placed it over her shoulders, being careful not to touch her when he did it. She was being nice, and he didn’t want to scare her. The slicker reached her ankles and would protect her from the storm.

“I don’t have another one,” he said to Paige and Misty, his eyes downcast.

“It’s okay,” Misty said. “But I’m with Sarah and just want to be warm.”

“Thank you,” said Sarah and touched his hand.

An odd expression came across Simon's face before it disappeared. The cats touched him, and every so often Yolanda kissed his cheek, but contact with another person was something that rarely happened in his world. He liked that Sarah wasn't afraid of him.

"What about the lions that you call cats? You said they're out there. They might attack," Paige insisted.

"If you walk next to Indra, they won't bother you. The cats are afraid of him." Simon kept his gaze on the floor.

Paige didn't say anything, but Simon knew her face would be mean .

"I'm cold," Sarah said. "Stay here if you don't want to be warm."

Simon looked up in time to see Paige give Sarah an evil glare. Then she shrugged.

"Okay, but if this is a trick," she said, giving Simon her best impression of menace, "I don't care how big you are, I'll hurt you."

Simon met her gaze. "I don't like to be hurt," he replied simply.

Paige glanced at Misty, and it was Misty's turn to give Paige a dirty look.

"You're outvoted," Misty said sternly, leaving no room for argument.

Paige shrugged and looked away.

"You can hold onto his fur like this." Simon showed them how to grab a section of the skin on Indra's back and hold on. Sarah placed her hand on the tiger's back, but Misty and Paige did not. "Stay close and stay with Indra if I need to handle one of the

cats.”

“Is that a dart gun?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” he nodded his head. “It will put a cat to sleep really quick.”

“What about the men?” she asked, her tone holding belligerence.

“If I shoot one of them with it, they’ll go down too.”

“Can I carry it?”

Simon thought about it for a moment. “What if you accidentally shoot it and hit one of us? ”

“I grew up hunting with my dad and brother. I know how to use a gun.” Her eyes challenged him.

“Okay, but if I need it back, will you promise to give it to me?” Simon asked.

Paige’s entire body relaxed, and Simon knew he was doing the right thing. He took the strap off his shoulder and showed her the gun.

“The safety is on. You push this to take it off.”

Paige took the gun and placed the strap over her shoulder, swinging it around to carry it on her back like Simon had. She gave him her first smile.

“I like you,” she said.

He looked uncomfortable and shuffled his feet.

“Let’s go,” Sarah begged, still shivering even with the rain slicker.

“No flashlights. You need to follow me and stay close,” Simon told them before they walked outside. He locked the lighthouse behind them.

The wind was worse, but the rain had let up a small bit. Simon moved quickly, and the girls followed. There wasn’t much visibility, but Simon knew where he was going. A few minutes into their hike, Misty tentatively placed her hand on Indra’s back.

“He’s warm,” she told Paige.

It was all Paige needed. Her fingers sank into Indra’s wet fur as they moved deeper into the forest, rain pelting them. The trail finally turned into a narrow paved road. There was no sign of the other cats or of the two men. Simon led them past a fenced area that held a group of buildings. Jerry was in there, and Simon didn’t want him to see the girls. Finally, he took them past large cages and pointed at a building about a hundred feet away.

The hut was a hut. Though it was large, it had a thatched roof that leaked when the rain was bad like it was now. Simon patched it every few months, and it would need it again after this storm. They moved faster. Even Indra knew they would be out of the weather soon and increased his stride.

Simon opened the door and quickly let them inside. He didn’t notice the odor, but Paige did.

She covered her nose with her arm. “What is that smell?”

“The cats’ food,” he said simply. “I have T-shirts you can change into, but I don’t have pants that will fit. You can change in my room.” Simon opened the door to his

bedroom and told them to wait a moment. They watched as he pulled a small box heater from the corner, plugged it in, and turned it on. “The room will heat quickly and you’ll be warm.”

Misty’s eyes didn’t leave the heater that was now glowing red.

“Does the door lock?” Paige asked suspiciously, delaying their entry into the room.

“No,” Simon answered and looked miserably at the door that led outside. “I will wait out there and make sure no one gets into the hut. You can lock the front door behind me,” he said.

“No,” Misty said, stepping forward and stopping Simon with the urgency in her voice. “We’re good. You can wait in the outer room and make sure no one opens the bedroom door. We don’t want you in the rain.”

“I can do that,” Simon said in relief. “The T-shirts are on the shelf.”

The girls looked around the small room. Dingy was a good word for what they saw. In the corner, there were makeshift shelves held up by cinder blocks. The shelves held his clothes, and the corner had an arrangement of plastic farm animals. They were all upright, facing around the room. There was a single rumpled bed with a small nightstand next to it. Several children’s books lay on top of it along with a cassette player. He’d told them he was teaching himself to read so he could be smart. Compassion swamped Misty.

“He’s huge,” Paige whispered as they rushed to gather around the heater. “I’ve never seen a man that tall or so big. He scared me, and I’m still not sold on him being safe.”

“He wants to help us, and I didn’t see a line of people behind him making the offer,” Sarah said, her blue fingers all but touching the metal grill of the heater. “Indra is his

friend. Those other men wanted to kill the cats and do something bad to us. We got lucky.”

Paige sighed and gave in. “We did. I’ll try to be nicer.”

Misty, who knew the wet clothes were making them colder, walked to the stack of dark T-shirts and handed one to each of them. They were the official shirts for the island and each had the word “staff” prominently across the back, with a logo on the front pocket. They were old, but they had been neatly folded and they were soft and clean.

“We’ll get warm faster once we’re in dry clothes.” Misty turned, feeling shy, as she removed her wet shirt and jacket and slipped the T-shirt on. It went to her calves, the bulk of the shirt swamping her in a cascade of material. She quickly removed her pants and turned to the other girls. They had made the same decision and had undressed like Misty. If Simon wanted to hurt them, he would have. They had no choice but to trust him.

“I’m still cold,” Sarah said with her hands at the heater. Her lips were blue along with her fingers.

“I have an idea,” Misty said. There was a blanket on the bed, and she pulled it off and lifted it over her head. “Let’s make a tent over the heater, and we’ll warm up faster.”

It worked, and within five minutes, they were finally warm enough that they had stopped shivering.

“It’s too warm in here to leave,” Sarah said. “But we should make sure Simon knows we’re changed.”

“Maybe he has another heater going,” Paige said. She walked over and opened the

door.

“Who the hell are you?” a strange man asked.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Misty knew this wasn't one of the two men they had run into earlier. He was short, about her height, and he was also thinner. Honestly, he looked like a drowned rat with beady eyes, and she didn't like him or his tone. Then she saw the man standing behind him. He was one of the hunters, and they were in trouble.

"I told you there were girls on the island," the man who'd been called Dale earlier said snidely. His eyes narrowed, giving them a dark, predatory glint. He fixated on the three girls with an unsettling level of interest almost like they were the perfect bowl of ice cream. He even licked his lips .

Misty rubbed her arms, a slimy feeling running up her back.

Jerry turned to Simon. "Who are they, and why are they here?" he barked.

Simon's entire demeanor changed. His shoulders slumped, he looked down, shuffled his feet, and stumbled over his words. "It's, it's too cold to stay outside during the storm," he said softly.

"They can't be here, period," Jerry yelled harshly. "What are you, stupid? Don't bother answering that, you moron. Have you rounded up the cats?"

"Who are you?" Paige demanded, her hands going to her hips.

Jerry took a menacing step toward her, and Simon's demeanor changed again. He moved into Jerry's path and straightened his back which left him looking down on

Jerry.

“What are you doing?” Jerry demanded as he stared upward.

“Leave them alone.” Simon’s voice was low and deep, the words a command. Indra, who Misty hadn’t noticed, gave a low growl and moved toward Simon.

Jerry took a slow step back, his eyes now glued to the tiger. “I’m going to kill that animal, and it’s your fault. He should be in a cage.”

“You aren’t killing Indra,” Simon said. His jaw set in a hard line and it seemed like he grew even larger .

Jerry stared at Simon, his eyes nervously twitching toward Indra every few seconds. Misty would swear he was planning something and it wasn’t good.

“What’s come over you?” Jerry finally asked, almost whining. "Dale and his brother paid big money to come to the island." He cast his eyes to the girls and then back to Simon. “Dale says you’re interfering with the hunt. Do you want your precious animals to starve?"

Dale cut in, “I want the girls too, I’ll pay extra.” His hungry eyes made Misty nauseous.

Jerry turned his attention to the girls, his teeth displaying a predatory smile.

Paige took a step forward, leaving the other two in the doorway to the bedroom. “The girls,” she waved her hand to encompass Misty and Sarah, “don’t want you,” she practically spat. Indra moved closer to her, and Paige’s fingers sank into his fur. He growled again, his sharp teeth flashing in the light while his eyes remained on Jerry.

“Why don’t you girls come over here so we can talk?” Jerry asked with the same whine, his eyes staying on Indra again. “This gentleman,” he gave a chin nod to Dale, “would like to spend time with you. I will make it worth your while if you’re nice to him. You’re in trouble or you wouldn’t be here.” He gave them a few seconds but the girls remained silent. “Come on, make this easier on yourselves.” He took another step in their direction .

“No,” Simon roared, his voice vibrating inside the hut. “Leave.” He blocked Jerry’s path, and his hand slapped against his leg, calling to the tiger. Indra’s muscles rippled under his orange striped coat as he slowly advanced. His ears were back and his eyes held predatory glints of rage. When Indra reached Simon’s side, he bared his teeth as his tale twitched in irritation.

Jerry and Dale backed slowly toward the door.

“Get that animal in a cage,” Jerry yelled at Simon at the same time his shaking hand found the doorknob. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Baxter has a handgun,” they heard Dale whisper. “We’ll find him and then take care of business.”

The men hurried outside.

The silence of their sudden departure lasted a few seconds.

“We need to get out of here,” Paige finally said.

“And go where?” Sarah asked.

Simon shuffled closer. “I can lock you in the lighthouse while I round up the cats.”

“Why are they loose?” Paige asked.

Simon’s massive shoulders shrugged. “The cats need time to be free. During large storms no one but me and the cats are here so I let them run.”

“You stay here all alone during a hurricane?” Sarah asked, her head cocked to the side as she studied Simon closely.

“Yes.”

“Do you get scared?”

He nodded. “After I’m smart, I won’t be scared of the loud boom,” he said. “The thunder doesn’t bother Indra and he likes to keep me company.”

Misty couldn’t believe this conversation was taking place. Simon was so big she hadn’t expected him to be afraid of anything. His reaction to the men surprised her. At first, he was fearful and then protective. Misty doubted she would have given him a chance if they hadn’t been desperate but thankfully, Sarah had him figured out. His mind was that of a child, and he was afraid of thunder.

“If we go to the lighthouse, we won’t be warm,” Sarah told him. “Is there someplace we can hide that will keep us from freezing?”

Simon’s gaze traveled over the girls, but it was the exact opposite of how Dale and Jerry looked at them. Simon seemed unsure and maybe a little afraid. Sarah took his hand and his eyes softened.

“Do you have blankets or maybe raincoats we could use to stay warm?” she asked. “If we have something that will keep us dry, the lighthouse might work.”

“I have a tarp and blankets,” he told her proudly. “The door at the top of the lighthouse is warm if you sit with your back against it. You’ll need to climb the stairs to reach it though. ”

Sarah gave him a huge smile. “What about a dryer so we can dry our clothes before we go?”

He shook his head.

“That’s okay, we’ll make do.” She turned to the other girls. “We can put on our wet clothes and bring the T-shirts so they’re dry. If we have blankets and dry clothes, we can stay warm.”

“Who made you boss?” Paige demanded, her demeanor distrustful again.

Sarah took a step toward Paige. “I don’t want to run into those men. Do you have a better idea?”

Misty wanted to applaud Sarah. She was a firecracker. “I’m with Sarah,” Misty said. “I don’t want to be cold, but the men scare me more than wet clothes. You’re outvoted again, Paige.”

“I didn’t say I was in charge,” Paige grumbled before she placed her hands on her hips and addressed Simon. “How many lions are out there?” she asked him.

“Eleven.”

Her eyes looked like they would bug from her head and she gulped. “Eleven isn’t so bad.”

Misty gave her a look that said eleven was ten too many.

“Four tigers, two panthers, and one mountain lion,” Simon added.

“Tigers like Indra?” Sarah asked, her eyes larger than Misty had ever seen them.

“No. Indra was raised by people since he was a cub. The other four tigers are mostly wild and come from zoos that went out of business. They don’t like people.”

“You let them run around the island?” Paige asked.

“They are my friends and they need to be free,” he insisted with mounting frustration.

Sarah touched his arm again. “It’s okay, Simon, we’re just curious.”

His expression softened when he looked down at her.

“I will put them in their cages so they don’t hurt you.”

“Will the bad men hurt them in their cages?” she asked.

Simon’s expression suggested they might. His eyes jumped around the room, not looking at the girls. This time it was Paige who moved closer.

“How can we help you?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

The girls changed into their wet clothes. They were cold and miserable as soon as they pulled them on. After they left the bedroom, Simon gathered a stack of blankets and the tarp while the girls stood with their arms around their shivering bodies.

"Will you keep Indra? He'll protect you," Simon asked nervously, not looking at Paige.

"What if he eats us?" Paige interjected, her tone edged with snideness.

"You would be dead," Simon replied earnestly before he turned back to Sarah. "He likes you and he won't eat you. I'll give you snacks you can feed to him. I dry the meat myself."

Simon worried about his tiger friend and it angered Misty that Paige continued being mean. He was doing everything he could to help. Without him, she doubted they would have survived the hunters or the large cats.

Misty had never seen a person his giant size. His graying beard showed he wasn't young but when he talked, Simon reminded her of her brother, Noah. It was the innocence of his thoughts. She didn't fool herself in thinking Simon wasn't dangerous but she knew in her heart that he was not dangerous to them. He'd proved it and if Paige didn't stop acting up, Misty might turn to violence and knock her upside the head.

"What about our candy bars?" Sarah asked with a soft smile and a slight tip to her

head. "Can he eat those?"

"He doesn't like sweets," Simon replied. "But chips and sandwiches he'll gobble in one bite."

"We're fresh out of chips and sandwiches," Paige said, holding a hand up and twirling her finger.

"Paige," Misty scolded, drawing out her name. "Be. Nice."

Paige deflated and Misty would swear her eyes teared.

"I'm sorry," Paige said. "I'm cold, tired, and worried." It was her turn to look down at her feet.

"We're in this together," Misty assured her. Paige wasn't as tough as she made herself out to be, and her bark was much worse than her bite, as Misty's grandmother would have said. Misty also suspected Paige used these tactics to hide her fear.

"We should walk together and wrap the tarp over our heads and shoulders," Sarah suggested, breaking into Misty and Paige's moment.

Misty looked at the tarp and thought about walking on the trail wrapped together in it with the other girls. It wouldn't work.

"We had trouble keeping hold of Indra on some parts of the trail," she said. "I don't think we can stay under the tarp the entire way. The clothes we're wearing are wet, and it's the T-shirts we need to keep dry."

"I'll carry the blankets wrapped in the tarp. Fill it with whatever you need including the shirts," Simon offered. He laid the tarp out and placed the blankets in the center.

Misty walked around the hut and looked for anything that might help them.

"What about the knives?" Paige asked from the other side of the room. She stood at a large metal table.

"Those are the knives I use to cut up the cats' food. They are very sharp," Simon warned.

"Do you have sheaths for them?" Paige asked.

"No, but I have a few small towels you can wrap them in."

Paige picked up one of the medium knives and stuck it through her belt loop, being careful not to slice it. The pommel kept it from sliding through. "This will do, and hopefully I won't cut myself."

Misty looked on dubiously. One swing of Paige's arm and she'd be missing a section of skin.

Simon went into his bedroom and came out. "That is dangerous." He placed his huge hand out with a pocketknife resting on his palm. "This will work better and you can hide it in your pocket. I keep it sharp too."

Paige swapped knives with him and put hers in her pocket as he suggested. Simon pulled hand towels from a shelf and wrapped two knives up which he gave to Misty and Sarah.

"Those men are bad. They pay to hunt the cats and kill them."

"Is that why you let the cats out?" asked Paige accusingly.

Misty wanted to slap her.

“The hunters weren’t supposed to come to the island until after the storm. Jerry sold them two new females that came in a few weeks ago. He says it’s for money to pay for the other cats’ food, but Jerry is a liar. He calls them animals and he likes hurting them.” Simon’s big fists clenched in anger, and Misty could tell he was very mad.

Sarah spoke up. “We’ll keep Indra safe while you get the other cats. We won’t let the mean men get him.”

Simon’s lips quirked up. “Indra likes you. He will keep you safe. ”

Sarah’s smile widened. “We’ll keep each other safe.”

This seemed to make Simon happy, and all was good until Paige’s rude tone entered the conversation again.

"We have candy bars and a few cheese cracker packs. Do you have anything solid we could eat?" Paige looked at Misty, who glared back. “Please,” Paige added.

Simon went to an upright refrigerator with a freezer and removed three plastic containers. He took them to the microwave and shoved all three inside.

"My friend makes me meals when I’m on the island alone. I can carry them in the tarp after they warm up and they’ll still be warm when we get to the lighthouse." He gave a sideways glance at Paige that seemed hopeful, but she wasn’t looking.

The thought of hot food had saliva pooling in Misty’s mouth. She watched as Simon placed a pan on a small two-burner stove after he’d filled the pan with water.

"I have hot chocolate," he said before turning to a cabinet and digging around inside.

When his hands came out, he was holding a large thermos. "It gets cold here sometimes, and I take hot chocolate with me to visit Indra."

Misty's gaze traveled the hut and she saw it in a new light. This was Simon's home among his cat friends. It didn't look quite as dingy as it had when she first arrived. From the small, tattered rug in front of the sink to the stack of mismatched dishes, Simon had made the hut special.

"I think we have everything," Sarah said after adding a few extra items to the tarp. "Will you be able to carry it all?" she asked Simon, looking at the large pile they'd accumulated.

Simon gathered the sides and hefted it up and over his shoulder like it weighed nothing. He smiled at Sarah, who wore his rain slicker again, and moved to the door. If he had entirely white hair, he would make a larger-than-life Santa Claus, Misty thought to herself.

"Come on, Indra, you get to stay with Sarah while I round up the other cats." Simon opened the door, and Indra sprang outside.

The cold and rain hit Misty as soon as she walked through the door. They would be miserable until they were dry again. The night seemed darker, but Simon didn't want them using their flashlights, so she stumbled along, sometimes only able to follow the sound of his voice.

The cold quickly leached through Misty's clothes into her bones. She judged they were at the halfway point when lightning struck a nearby tree. The explosion lit the sky, and the noise scared her half to death.

"Keep moving," Simon yelled above the storm from further ahead than Misty realized he was.

She turned and didn't see Paige, who had been right behind her a moment before. She looked to where Simon and Sarah had turned on the path, and she could no longer see them. She couldn't leave Paige, so she backtracked. Paige cried out, and Misty moved faster. She found her facing a large black cat that had to be one of the panthers. It moved in a slow circle.

The jet-black fur glistened as water droplets cascaded off its muscular body. What struck Misty were the panther's emerald eyes that pierced through the gloom and stalked its prey. A flash of lightning illuminated the night, and it bared its sharp, white teeth slightly.

A loud growl came from behind Misty, and she spun at the same time Indra barreled between Paige and the panther. The other cat quickly ran into the forest and disappeared.

Indra didn't stop for a back rub; he turned and bounded onto the trail, running back in the direction he came from.

"Did you see that? The tiger saved me again," Paige said in astonishment.

"We need to keep going and keep up this time," Misty said when Paige turned large eyes to her. "There are like twenty lions and tigers out here."

Rustling in the bushes had Misty's heart dropping into her stomach. Simon stepped out, followed by Sarah and the tiger.

"We ran into one of the black panthers," Misty told him.

Simon nodded, then turned and started walking the path again, seemingly unworried about the panther.

Misty was frozen, and each foot seemed like a mile. She didn't remember the first walk between the hut and the lighthouse being so far. They finally veered off the path and hit the rocks, which meant they were close. She could no longer feel her feet or fingers. Simon walked like a mountain in front of them, shielding them from some of the wind and rain.

There was a loud pop, and Simon stumbled.

"Someone's shooting at us," Paige screamed.

Chapter Nineteen

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Something punched Simon's upper arm, and he went to one knee with the impact. For a moment, he didn't understand what had happened. Paige yelled out, and he realized he'd been shot. He ducked his head lower, pulling Indra down beside him on the rocky path. The shot came from above them.

Simon couldn't see the girls and he hoped they were hiding. Anything was better than running with the cats loose. He should have warned them about sudden movements. Their run-in with the panther didn't worry him. The panther would need to be very hungry to hurt one of them. Both panthers were circus animals and had human interaction before they came to the sanctuary. That wasn't always good and unfortunately, they hadn't bonded with Simon. Overall, they were lazy cats who enjoyed their prechopped food.

"You need to stay low, boy," he told Indra. Simon had clamped his hand over his wound and he now released the pressure. The dull ache intensified. He was too wet and cold to tell how bad it bled.

A bullet struck the rocks below him, making a sharp and distinct noise, almost a high-pitched "ping" that could be heard over the storm. The metallic echo resonated for a second after impact. Simon didn't think whoever was shooting could see where he'd hidden. The burning pain in his arm spiked for a moment, and he bit back a groan. Using the rocks for cover and leverage to help with his injured knee, he moved a few feet forward, staying as low to the ground as possible.

“Simon.” One of the girls called out in concern.

He wasn’t sure which one it was, but he couldn’t answer. Simon moved again, and another shot rang out. “Stay,” he told Indra and hoped he would listen. There were three huge boulders at the top that he headed for. After moving a few more yards, he slipped around the rocks and sank to the ground.

“You’re going to hit one of those girls,” a hunter said angrily.

“I’m trying to get that dumb giant or the tiger.”

“You can’t see out there. Stop shooting.”

Simon peered around the boulder at the two men. They were about twenty-five feet from the lighthouse door. To keep the girls safe, he had to get around them.

“I think I hit the giant and he’s down there dead.”

“Go look. We need to know he’s out of the hunt. The girls can’t hurt us, but his furry friend can, so keep your eyes open.”

Simon thought it was the hunter named Dale speaking, which meant it was Baxter coming after him. The man moved closer, peering over the ridge at the area below.

“I see the girls,” he said. “They’re going back down.”

Simon moved quickly, barreling into the hunter, pushing him into a tree. He had a knife in his hand, and Simon grabbed his wrist, twisting until the man grunted and released it. Baxter scrambled to get away. Simon caught his jacket and jerked him back.

Slowly, Simon lifted him over his head and tossed him down the rocks. Baxter continued screaming, so Simon knew the fall hadn't killed him. A sudden, deep growl followed by a roar filled the night. Indra gave a series of guttural snarls .

"No," Baxter screamed again. The sound cut off, and with a last snarl from Indra, the fight was over. Simon turned toward where he'd last seen the other hunter, but he was gone. He looked around for the gun but couldn't find it. He hoped it was with Baxter below.

Simon carefully made his way down the rocks, staying off the path. "Sarah?" he called softly when he reached the dead hunter. He checked around the area but couldn't locate the gun.

"We're over here," Sarah called.

Simon looked in her direction but couldn't see any of the girls. He moved toward her voice and found them hunkered down behind a group of rocks that weren't as big as the boulders. Indra was with them.

"Are you okay?" Simon asked.

"Yes. I think Indra hurt one of the men."

"He's dead," Simon told them.

"Good boy," Paige told the tiger, then bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"We need to hurry," Simon said urgently. "The other hunter is still out here and I can't find the gun. He may have it."

Thankfully, Indra had never hunted for his meals, and he hadn't dragged the dead

man off to eat him. Simon wouldn't have been surprised if he had, but this was better and the girls wouldn't need to witness such a grisly sight. The tiger moved to Simon and rubbed against his side .

"I'm so cold," Sarah said, her teeth chattering.

"The clothes and blankets are in the tarp. If we hurry, you'll be warm soon."

Simon took the lead and they began climbing again. The burn in his arm increased, but he wasn't sure what could be done about it. The wind howled around them, whipping against their bodies with a relentless force. Each step on the path was a battle for balance, as the rain poured down in sheets, making the climb slippery and unstable.

Simon's senses remained on high alert. Lightning illuminated the path ahead, but also blinded him momentarily.

One of the girls cried out. Simon turned and caught her before she fell. His fingers were numb from the cold. He pushed forward so he could get the girls to safety. The climb felt endless, his energy sapped by the cold and the bullet.

Finally, they saw the door to the lighthouse. With a final push, Simon scrambled to the level area, putting the girls in front of him so he could keep them safe if the hunter was still near. One of them stumbled, but she righted herself and they reached the door. Like the first time, Simon reached over and tried to unlock it, but his left hand wasn't working and he dropped the key.

"I've got it," Paige said.

She tried to hand it to him, but he shook his head. A few seconds later, Simon heard the key going in the lock. The door swung open, and they practically fell through the

doorway. The contrast between the raging storm outside and the calm inside was stark. Simon took a moment to catch his breath and slowly sank down the wall.

“There’s blood,” Misty said.

“Simon?” he heard Sarah whisper above him. “You’re hurt,” she said next.

“I’m hurt. The hunter shot me.”

“What are we going to do?” Sarah asked, but it sounded far away.

“Get him upstairs where it’s warmer and we can stop the bleeding,” Paige said.

“How do we get him up there?”

Simon didn’t know who asked because his vision went black.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

“Simon?” Misty tapped his shoulder. He opened his eyes, his expression confused.

“My arm hurts,” he said and sat up with a grimace.

“We need to get you upstairs where it’s warmer. Can you help us move you?”

He tried to rise but sank down, unable to stand. “Go up there and get warm. I’ll be okay here,” he said before slumping to the side.

Indra sniffed his bleeding arm. Misty held her breath until Simon lifted his good arm and encircled the cat, drawing him down next to him.

“No,” Misty answered after she was sure the cat wouldn’t attack the blood. She liked Indra but his teeth were enormous. “The door is locked and we’re safe. It’s too cold for you to stay down here, and we need to treat your wound. We can’t move you unless you help.”

Paige and Sarah stepped off the stairs and walked toward Simon. They had taken the supplies to the top floor.

“It’s warmer up there, and we can come back down here to change into our T-shirts once we get him upstairs,” Paige said.

“He’s not cooperating,” Misty replied. “We need his help or we’ll never make it.”

Sarah sat down by Simon's head and smoothed the hair off his forehead. "Does it hurt really bad?" she asked him.

"It burns," he complained.

"We can help you get up the stairs and Indra can help too. Let me take the dart gun and it will be easier for you." She helped get the strap over his bad shoulder and handed it to Paige. Simon didn't make a sound. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Watching Simon go from the floor to a standing position was like seeing a building demolition in reverse mode. He had looked smaller lying on the floor, but his mountain size seemed to fill the entry once he was upright. She saw the grimace on his face and thought it was the bullet wound. She slipped under his good arm and he placed his injured arm on Sarah's shoulder.

"What if Indra goes up behind us? If you fall, he will be a softer landing," Sarah said.

"I don't want to hurt him," Simon told her.

When they reached the stairs, Indra took the decision away when he bounded upward before he could be stopped. Simon inhaled deeply and lifted his leg to take the first step.

"There are forty-two steps," Sarah said.

"He doesn't need to know that," Paige snapped. "It will make it harder."

"No, I'm smart enough to count the stairs. I know my numbers." Simon turned and smiled at Sarah. "It will make it easier. Thank you."

Misty was back to wanting to slap Paige. She wasn't who Misty thought she was, but

then, Misty wasn't who she thought she was either. She was discovering her strength and determination to survive was what mattered now.

They rested after Simon counted ten stairs. Misty had never seen feet the size of his, and every step upward reminded her of a sledgehammer her father used a few times. He was so tall he had to bend almost in half so he could place a small amount of weight on Misty's shoulder. His foot lifted and it came down with a clang on the next stair.

They rested four times before they made it to the top. The girls quickly changed out of their wet clothes one at a time while the other two stayed with Simon. Once they were dry, they got to work.

"We need to cut your shirt off," Misty told him. It had long sleeves and was plastered to his shivering body.

She held up scissors and smiled at Sarah, who looked as exhausted and bedraggled as Misty felt. The warmth from the light behind the door made her more tired. Maybe after they took care of Simon, they could take a nap. Misty had no idea what time it was.

"Sarah brought the scissors," she told Simon. "I'm not sure why but they will help."

Simon groaned after she cut the material and was trying to peel it off. Indra growled slightly.

"Rub his belly," Simon told Paige. "He likes that. The smell of blood is making him nervous."

"It's making it so he wants to eat you," Paige responded but then smiled. "I'm teasing. Your tiger saved me twice. He's my new best friend. I think I can manage

belly rubs.”

As if he understood the words, the tiger lay down with a huff and rolled to his back.

“You like that, don’t you, kitty,” Paige said when she started scratching his belly.

Misty wanted to laugh. Paige actually liked the tiger, and that was funny. Misty had a feeling the tiger and Paige were a lot alike.

Sarah pulled the cut shirt off Simon. When she finished, he lay back against a blanket they had folded up and propped against the wall. Misty examined the wound. It looked better than she thought it would. She’d expected the hole to be huge, but it was actually small. There was light bruising and the skin was puckered around it. When he moved, it bled.

“The bullet went in but it didn’t come out,” she told Simon.

“It hurts. Can you take it out?”

“I’ve never done it before.” She touched the wound and he hissed softly, sucking in a quick breath. “I think I can see the bullet.”

“Here,” Paige said, handing over the pocketknife Simon had given her at the hut. “You’ll need to pry it out.”

“Have you removed a bullet before?” Misty asked hopefully.

“No, but I’ve seen it done in movies.”

“I’ve never seen it done at all. You might be better at this.”

Paige sat down next to Indra again and shook her head. “The tiger needs me. He’s upset.”

Misty rolled her eyes. “I might be able to get it out, but it will hurt.”

“It hurts now, go ahead.” Simon closed his eyes.

Misty’s mom had always doctored her father, but she had watched. He had a splinter one time that was huge and deep. She remembered how difficult it was to get out. Squaring her shoulders, she used her finger to see if she could feel the bullet. She could.

“I may be able to get the blade under it and flip it out. Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll do it quick. One, two, three.” She pushed the knife tip into the hole and felt the bullet hit the blade. She slid the tip to the side and managed to get the blade under it, or at least it felt that way. “Here goes,” she said and applied pressure. The bullet easily slipped out along with a gush of blood. She placed one of the towels that Sarah had also packed over the wound and pressed down.

“It looked like you knew what you were doing,” said Paige lightly. She was still lazily scratching Indra’s belly.

Misty smiled at her in relief. “It was easier than I thought.” She looked down at Simon. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“Better. The burn isn’t as bad.” He rested his head against the blanket again and closed his eyes. Indra slipped in beside him and licked Simon’s face. His hand came out and sank into the tiger’s fur.

“We need food and rest,” Misty said after she stood and stretched.

“I’ll get the food,” Sarah said.

“I’ll take care of the hot chocolate,” Paige said and jumped up before Sarah was standing.

The girls went to work organizing a meal. Simon lay quietly, petting Indra. There was more than enough food for all of them .

“Can the tiger have some of this?” Paige asked.

“He likes Yolanda’s cooking.”

“Good because I’m still not sure he won’t eat us if he’s hungry.” Paige placed a portion of her meal on one of the lids and placed it on the floor.

The tiger made a deep chuffing sound in acknowledgement, and they all started laughing. For a few moments, all was right in their world. They were dry, warm, and safe. It wouldn’t last.

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Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

A dull throb persisted in Simon's arm, but eating Yolanda's good food made him feel better. He circled his shoulder to be sure he could still use it. The ache was there but workable.

"You shouldn't do that," Sarah said. "It might start bleeding again."

"I need to get the cats back in their pens and find the other hunter," he replied, puffing his chest out a bit to let her know he wasn't hurt badly.

"What will you do to the hunter?" Paige asked.

Simon shrugged, then winced slightly at the ache it caused. He could use the arm, and that's what mattered. The hunter had proved how dangerous he was to the girls and to the cats. Simon had to do something about it, but he wasn't sure what. He also didn't want the girls involved because it would be bad for them. There was an injured cat running around the island, which made it more dangerous if it were still alive.

Then, there was Jerry. That caused the biggest dilemma for Simon. He'd considered him a savior for so long. He didn't like Jerry and understood now that Jerry was a bad person. But Simon knew he owed him for giving him a home.

No, his shoulder wasn't the problem. Stopping the bad things that happened at the sanctuary was.

"Will you kill him?" Paige pushed.

“Stop that,” said Misty. “No one is killing anyone.” Her eyes snapped to Simon with a look of apology. “It’s not your fault the hunter died.” Her eyes shifted to Indra and her voice trailed off.

“Those men would have hurt us,” Paige insisted. “We have the right to defend ourselves, and they even shot Simon. He has the biggest reason to defend himself.” She crossed her arms and stared belligerently.

“Thou shall not kill,” Misty stated and knew the second the words left her lips she shouldn’t have said them.

“Wake up, miss pearly pants,” Paige shot back. “Simon tossed a man over a cliff, and the tiger finished it. It was him or us, and if there is a God, he would know it too.”

Misty stared. This was the Paige she knew from school. A grin split her face.

“What’s that for?” Paige demanded.

“You’ve been acting strange, but now you’re the Paige that led our escape from that horrible place.”

Paige’s face darkened, and Misty’s smile grew.

“You’re blushing,” said Sarah, unable to hide her grin.

Paige turned her head and looked at Simon.

“Your face is kind of red,” he said.

“I’m mean, and I get picked on. Now I’m nice and get the same treatment.”

Sarah and Misty looked at each other and started laughing. Paige rolled her eyes, but Simon could tell she wasn't angry.

"I'm stuffed," Sarah said, rubbing her stomach after she pushed away the empty container.

"Indra liked his food." Paige lifted the lid up so they could see it was clean. Indra licked his paws a few feet from Simon, appearing content. Paige shifted her attention. "Did Indra eat your fingers?" she asked.

Simon looked at his hand and curled his pinky, thumb, and stubs into a fist.

"No, it wasn't Indra," he said. "I wasn't paying attention. When you're around the cats, even Indra, you must always pay attention. Never go near their food and always remember they can hurt you real, real bad by accident."

"Did the lion swallow the fingers, or did you get them back?"

"Paige," Misty objected sternly.

Simon looked thoughtful. "I woke up, and they weren't there. I never asked."

"Hmm," Paige said and cast a squinted look in Misty's direction. "I bet he ate them, and now he has a taste for human flesh."

Simon decided right then that he liked Paige too. His large size didn't seem to bother her now, and she said what she felt. That wasn't a bad thing. He didn't know about Cleveland liking human flesh, though. The lion acted the same after the incident.

"Can we take a nap?" asked Sarah.

Simon could barely keep his eyes open, and it sounded good to him.

“I’m exhausted,” Misty agreed.

“I need to get the cats into their pens, but I’m too tired.”

“Then it’s settled,” Misty said.

They spread out the tarp with the dry side up and shared the blankets so they could all be comfortable. The storm raged outside as the wind carried large objects that struck the brick building and sometimes all the way up to the glass at the top where they rested. The steady strobe of light flickering into their small area from beneath the door was oddly comforting.

Paige lay next to Simon, the tiger snuggled between them. Misty and Sarah lay close to each other.

“Do you think we’ll get off the island?” Sarah asked in a low whisper that Simon could hear.

“I know we will,” Misty answered.

Simon hoped she was right. He closed his eyes.

*

“Simon,” Misty said and touched his arm softly.

He examined her. She had nice eyes. They only looked angrily at Paige, and she smiled at him like Sarah.

“Does anyone else have a key to the lighthouse?” she asked.

He sat up and heard a sound he couldn't place. “No one should have a key, but I think someone is trying to get in. I'll go check.” The sound was a steady scratch that could be a large branch against the side of the building.

Misty placed her hand out to help him up .

Simon shook his head. “I'll pull you down. I can stand.” He hefted himself from the floor using the wall. It was slower than he normally moved and again he grimaced before straightening. He rotated his shoulder and felt a heavy pull, but it was bearable. He reached over and picked up the tranquilizer gun.

“Stay up here with this,” he told Paige and handed it to her.

“I've got my knife,” Sarah said.

He nodded in her direction before heading down the spiral staircase. There were small lights at strategic points on the stairway which helped him see. He could hear the storm raging outside, and when he came off the last step, he landed in an inch of water. The door was closed, but water seeped in beneath it during storms. Simon didn't think anyone was outside, but he decided to check.

Slowly, he opened the door. The low growl and push against his leg was unexpected. Before he could react, he realized it was Summa, a young male lion who for the most part was friendly. Simon had spent extra time with Summa, but he didn't quite trust him yet. He looked around outside but saw no movement in the murky darkness.

“I guess you can come inside, but I have company, and you must be on your best behavior.” The lion's soaked hair stuck up in odd places, and he peered at Simon like he would do anything not to go back into the storm. “Be nice to Indra too. If you give

him a reason, he'll put you on your back.”

Indra got along with the cats who left him alone. He'd gone with Simon to feed, and he and Summa never had a problem. Simon wasn't sure how it would work up the stairs in the smaller area, but he didn't know what else to do. He walked to the stairs and noticed Summa's limp when he followed. The cat stumbled, and Simon saw the blood trail.

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Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Paige and Sarah woke up as Simon walked over them to get to the stairwell. Sarah looked around sleepily, not sure where she was, and Paige looked thoughtful.

“How long did we sleep?” Paige asked.

“I think it was about an hour. I heard noises downstairs, and Simon went to check,” Misty told her.

“You know we’re kind of screwed here,” Paige said.

“Why is that?” Sarah asked while she stretched and yawned.

“We’re stuck, and when the storm ends, we’ll be caught,” Paige said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“The hunters are our biggest concern right now,” Misty reminded them.

“I’m not saying they aren’t, I’m just thinking ahead,” Paige replied somewhat belligerently. “Our boat is gone, and we’re stuck.”

“You’re the one who wanted to take the boat,” Sarah snapped, her eyes going hard with anger.

“I’m not perfect, and I thought it would be the best chance to get away.”

“You mean our best chance to drown,” Sarah shot back.

“I don’t know why you’re upset,” Paige insisted. “We’ll probably be eaten by one of the cats anyway.”

“They’ll eat me and Sarah, but they’ll spit you out,” Misty said, joining the conversation.

Paige stuck out her tongue. That was when the large lion scampered off the stairs and stopped when he saw the girls.

Indra rose and growled. The lion bared its teeth.

“Stop that, both of you,” Simon said, coming up behind the lion. “This is Summa,” he told the girls. “He’s hurt, and he might be the lion that was stabbed.”

“His teeth look really big,” Paige said.

The lion plopped down on its side suddenly and let out a strange low sound. Sarah, who had gone to her feet at the sight of Summa, dropped to her knees beside him.

“Be careful,” Simon urged.

The cat watched Sarah, but he didn’t lift his head.

“How did he know to come here?” Misty asked.

“Even in the rain, he can smell my scent,” Simon told her. “I keep them safe and they know that.”

“That’s cool,” said Sarah. “You’re like the cat whisperer.”

Simon had no idea what she was talking about, and his attention was on Summa. The cat panted heavily. With his fur wet, it was hard to see where he was injured. Indra paced back and forth twice before he lay down.

“Are they friends?” Misty asked.

Simon shook his head, looked at the floor dubiously, and sank down, stretching out his long legs in front of him to get comfortable. “No. In the wild, they live in different parts of the world and rarely come into contact with each other. Here they do, but they’re leery. Summa was raised by people, and he’s a little better than the other lions around Indra.”

“You know so much about them,” Sarah said. “How did you learn?”

Misty watched as Simon’s shoulders straightened. He ran his hand gently over the lion’s fur as he spoke, “Mrs. Miller at the library helps me. When she sees interesting articles about big cats, she saves them for me, and she reads them to me if I can’t do it myself. She says I’m emp—” Simon thought about the word for a moment. “Empathic,” he shrugged, “I think that’s what she calls it.”

Misty wasn’t familiar with the word, but Paige was.

“So you really do talk to the animals?” she asked.

“I always talk to them,” he said. “They understand.” He moved his hand around Summa’s flank area until the cat lifted its head and bared his teeth.

“I think he was stabbed here,” Simon told them.

“Is there anything you can do?” Misty asked.

“What I need is back in the hut.”

“Will you tranquilize him?” Paige asked.

“Yeah, but I can do that with a dart from the gun. I need my stitching tools and a light.”

“I’ll go with you,” Sarah said.

He looked at her skeptically. “It’s a long walk and you would be safer here.”

Sarah looked at the other girls. “I want to help Simon.”

“It’s freezing out there,” said Paige as she cautiously watched the lion. She looked up at Simon. “Do you plan on leaving him with us?”

“Indra will be here, and he won’t let Summa hurt you. I think Summa will be okay, though.” He looked at Sarah. “I need to put the other cats back in their cages, and it won’t be safe. You need to stay here.”

Sarah sighed dramatically. “Okay, I’ll take care of Summa until you get back.”

Simon gave his own sigh, and Misty knew it was relief. She didn’t think he was accustomed to girls other than Mrs. Miller who helped him learn. She had a feeling that Simon wasn’t as dumb as he thought himself. His knowledge of the large cats was remarkable. She agreed with Paige, though. Being here alone with Summa was worrying. They’d grown accustomed to Indra, and he’d proved he wouldn’t eat them. She was still weary and wanted nothing more than to lay back down and sleep. Thinking about the danger and getting caught was too much. They had no choice but to leave their safety to Simon. If he thought they were safe with Summa, they most likely were.

Simon's injury didn't seem to bother him much, and Misty knew he'd been concerned for the cats all night. "Be careful," she told him.

He gave her a strange look before he nodded and grabbed the dart gun leaning against the wall. "If you are in danger, the door leading to the light is unlocked and you could go in there. Take Indra with you and leave Summa out and you can lock the door from the inside."

"Thank you for helping us, Simon," Misty said. "It would be really bad if you weren't here."

"You are my friends," he told her. "I help my friends."

"Here," Sarah said and handed him the rain slicker. "I'm warm now and this will help keep you dry."

Simon put the slicker on, and they watched as he lumbered down the stairs. Indra tried to follow, but he told him no. Indra walked back over and lay down next to Misty, his eyes steady on the lion. Sarah moved into a more comfortable position and placed her hand on Summa's back. He didn't move or growl, so she left it there.

"I didn't know I liked cats so much," she told the others.

"I always knew I liked cats," Paige said. "But I like the house kind, not the horse kind with sharp teeth."

That made Sarah laugh, and then her expression changed. "I hope Simon is okay."

They all did.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon wasn't accustomed to anyone worrying about him. Well, Roberto and Yolanda cared, but they had known him for years. Mrs. Miller at the library cared too and he knew how lucky he was to have them in his life. This was different and his well-being seemed to matter to the girls. At first, Paige had brought back memories of the way he was treated on the street. She'd looked at him with fear and contempt, but he no longer saw that in her eyes. Misty and Sarah were easier, and they accepted him quickly. He appreciated their trust.

Simon should ask them why they were on the island. He didn't think their reason would be anything good. They were running away from something. That he knew.

He slugged through the forest, his pants and shoes drenched within minutes, but thankfully, his upper body stayed dry beneath the slicker. The food and nap helped, and he felt stronger, which was a good thing. The storm was in full rage, and the rain beat against the side of his face to the point he could barely see. He knew the island, though, and could walk it with his eyes closed.

Simon hoped one or more of the cats would seek him out during the walk. Sometimes during storms, they had their fun and were ready for a dry den. Unfortunately, they stayed hidden. They were in danger, and maybe they sensed it. Simon worried about them going up against the hunter. If he put them in their pens, there was nothing to stop Jerry from releasing another cat to hunt. Jerry could replace one of the undocumented cats with one of the documented ones, and the authorities would be none the wiser. It was a huge dilemma that weighed on him every step he took.

The lights of Jerry's apartment sprang out of the darkness. He unlocked the side gate and crept around to the back to look in the window. Jerry was with the hunter. They were standing over a table and checking out a map. Simon knew whatever they were talking about wasn't good. The storm would last through the next day, and Roberto wouldn't return until the day after that. Even if Simon returned the cats to their cages, they wouldn't be safe.

He shook his head fiercely, the water flying from his skin joining the rain. Summa's injury was the concern right now, and Simon decided the cats were safer loose on the island. He would check on the bobcats who were still in their pens on his way to the hut. He kept an eye out for Jerry and the hunter in case they came out.

Gerty and Cain were curled up in the back of their den waiting for the weather to improve. The swish of a tail let Simon know they were okay. He never released them because they couldn't hold their own with the larger cats. Assured they were well, he continued to the hut.

He walked around inside, grabbing the items he needed, trying to remember everything. Misty had done a good job getting the bullet out of his shoulder, and he hoped she would help Summa. It was nearly impossible for Simon to kneel, and without a table to put the lion on, he would need to if he had to stitch the wound. At the hut, he had a table where he could work comfortably on the cats when it was needed. He had learned so much because Jerry hated paying for the veterinarian. In Simon's opinion, the man wasn't a very good doctor, and he always smelled like alcohol, and it wasn't the antiseptic kind.

He heard a noise at the door and quickly carried the things he'd collected into his bedroom. Jerry walked inside with the hunter.

"They're at the lighthouse, I promise," Jerry said. "I have a key back at my room."

“Why didn’t you bring it?” the hunter complained.

“They might have been here. You want them, they’re yours, but how are you going to explain the death of your friend?”

“Baxter doesn’t have family. He had money, and he was trying to spend it before your giant killed him. I’ve paid you a lot out of my own pocket, and I want those girls. I’ll take killing the giant over one of the beasts too. No one will ever find his body, and they most likely won’t find Baxter’s.”

“What a friend,” said Jerry.

“Baxter and I lived to hunt, but our dream was hunting a human. You said I can take down the Neanderthal, and I’m taking you up on it. I’ll kill that POS in Baxter’s honor. Who gives a damn about his body?” There was a short silence, and then he said, “Let’s get out of here. I want those girls.”

Simon listened to their steps and then the closing of the door. He took a moment to think about what they said. Jerry and the hunter knew the girls were at the lighthouse, and he needed to keep them safe. He hurriedly gathered the last few things he needed before he left the warmth of the hut. The wind had grown worse, and even with his large size, Simon had to put his head down and push through it as the rain beat against him. Lightning struck another tree, and he felt the shake beneath his boots.

While he moved, he thought about where to take the girls so they could be safe. He went past the cat enclosures and realized they might work. Each enclosure had a den that was sheltered and would keep them out of the storm. The doors to each pen were metal, and they locked with the key Simon carried. Jerry didn’t have a copy of it. He’d been surprised when he overheard Jerry had the key to the lighthouse. He had to beat them there, and he increased his pace.

He made it to the rocks and climbed upward. Misty stuck her head over the stairwell when he entered the door.

“We need to get out of here now,” he told her when he reached the top.

“Now?” she asked.

“Jerry has a key to get in here, and he’s coming with the hunter.”

Paige sat up. “Would he shoot us?” she asked.

Simon didn’t immediately answer. His world was turning upside down. The hunter would do worse than shoot the girls, but yesterday he would have said Jerry was safe. He realized how stupid he was. Jerry was just as dangerous to the girls as the hunter.

“Jerry will hurt you if he’s given the chance. The other guy wants to hunt me after he has you.”

“We should stand our ground,” Paige said, her bravado back in full swing.

“Not here,” he said.

“Is there anywhere safe we can go?” Sarah asked, lifting her head from beside Summa.

“Yes. The lions’ pens are empty. They have dens in the back where you can hide and stay dry. It won’t be as warm as it is here, but it won’t be bad.” He gave them a pleading look because he had to keep them safe, and he wasn’t sure what to do if they wouldn’t come with him.

“If Simon says we need to move, we’re moving,” said Misty.

“I agree,” said Sarah. “But what about Summa?” She stood and began collecting her items.

“I’ll carry him if he can’t walk,” said Simon.

“What about our things?” Paige asked, grumpily.

“I’ll carry it all,” Simon told her, his frustration growing because they had to hurry. He leaned down and gritting his teeth against the pain in his knee, he picked up Summa. The cat didn’t object. He carried him to the stairs wondering if the large cat would survive. “Change into your wet clothes,” he told the girls and heard Paige grumble, but he ignored her. “Hurry.”

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Exhaustion ate at Misty's heels. The cold seeped into her bones, robbing her of breath. The chattering teeth of the three girls almost held a rhythm, though it was hard to hear over the hurricane. Staying in the pens didn't sound good to Misty, but her body temperature made thinking hard. Simon had Summa draped over his shoulder and still managed to carry the tarp.

What would they have done if he hadn't helped them?

Misty was rehashing her decision to leave the girls' home. It had been crazy, and they were paying for it now. She didn't see how it could possibly go in their favor, even with Simon's help. He had taken a life. It was self-defense and he would need to answer for his actions. Would the police believe them? Misty was unsure. She knew when they were caught, she, along with Paige and Sarah, would be returned to the school. She had trouble imagining the repercussions.

"We're never going to be warm again," Sarah complained.

Simon led the way and kept some of the wind off Sarah and Paige. Misty trailed behind Paige, which placed her at a disadvantage. The icy wind bit deeply into her flesh, burning hot in its fury. They had to find someplace safe where they could stay warm and hidden from the hunter. The thought of him sent additional shivers up Misty's spine.

She heard a growl. Before she could blink, Indra was at her side. Several lions stepped onto the trail behind them. Misty knew little about the giant cats, but she

knew these were females. Simon stepped between her and danger.

“Stay on the trail,” he said loudly so his voice could be heard over the wind. “I think they’ll follow us, but I’ll stay at the back to make sure they don’t cause trouble.”

Simon had told them not to run from the cats, but it was hard. Her heart thumped in her chest, threatening to break out. She’d seen three lions, but there were more out there. Simon treated them almost like pets, but then she remembered his severed fingers. He knew what the beasts were capable of, and even so, it was impossible not to feel his love and worry for each of them.

“A little further,” he said sometime later.

Misty’s brain had stopped functioning, and she barely made out the words. Paige and Sarah stayed in front of her, battling the elements without Simon blocking them. Thunder and lightning lit up the sky. Paige held a shaking flashlight, though seeing anything in the downpour was nearly impossible.

At home, beneath her parents' tutelage in the world of proper Christian women, Misty was taught to never complain. Through small surgical procedures performed by her mother, such as pulling an infected wisdom tooth once, she kept her tears to herself and didn’t shed them until she was alone in her room. Women were always to maintain decorum, speak softly, and never show anger towards men. Right now, she wanted to scream at the storm and use words she’d never spoken.

She tripped and slid several feet before mud filled her mouth and covered her face. She couldn’t see, and her fingers were so frozen she couldn’t feel them, so getting herself out of the mud might not happen. She tried by pushing up with her hands and legs, but it didn’t work and the mud sucked her back down.

Suddenly, a tug on the back of her clothes brought her upright, and Simon steadied

her on her feet.

“It’s just ahead,” he yelled over the storm. “We had to come this way so we weren’t seen. Do you want me to carry you?”

Misty looked ahead and straightened her back. She placed one foot in front of the other and moved forward on the trail, unable to speak because she was still spitting out mud.

“Stop,” Simon called.

Sarah stumbled back against Paige, and they went down. Indra was suddenly there, and Sarah pulled herself up using his back.

“We’re going to die,” said Paige, turning her head away from the onslaught of rain pouring down on them.

Metal clanked on metal, and through the nightmare storm, Misty saw a cage door open.

“In here,” said Simon.

Misty and Sarah helped Paige up, and the three of them stumbled through the gate. Indra came in, and then the door slammed shut behind them.

“Walk to your right,” he said. “There’s a small door. Stay low, or you’ll hit your head.”

The door lifted inward, and Misty pushed on it. The hinges slid open effortlessly, and she held it back and allowed Sarah and Paige through. She looked at the main door of the cage and saw three lions. They had followed Simon. He still carried the injured

one.

“Can you get inside?” Misty asked.

“I’ll put Summa down at the entrance, and he’ll need to be pulled through, then I can get in by going around to the other door.”

Misty ducked low and waited for Simon to place Summa on the ground.

“Help me,” she said when she tried to tug and his body didn’t budge.

Paige helped without uttering a single complaint, and they managed to get him inside. Another metal door located across the eight-by-ten room swung open, and Simon entered. Straw covered the floor, and out of the elements, it was tolerable. Once they changed out of their wet clothing, they might be able to warm up again.

“We need to stitch his wound,” said Simon, looking worriedly at the cat.

“Can we ch-change fir-first?” Sarah said, her lips trembling so hard it was difficult to understand her.

“Hurry,” Simon told them and stepped out of the pen. “I’m going to put the lions in another cage and lock them in the back section like this one.” He placed his hand toward Misty. “This is the key that locks all the cages. It’s the only one. No one can get past the outside door without it.”

“Will you need it to lock the lions in their cage?” Misty asked.

Simon looked down at her, an angry expression appearing on his face. His hand came up and he hit his palm against the side of his head.

“Stupid, Simon, stupid.”

Misty jumped up and grabbed his large hand. “No, Simon. You are not stupid. You’re the smartest man I’ve ever met.” And he was. Simon was definitely smarter than her father.

“I do stupid things,” he said, his head hanging low.

“We all do stupid things,” she told him.

“Can you read?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m a good reader and I still do stupid things.”

Slowly, a smile grew on Simon’s face. “I won’t hit myself again.”

“Good, because you’re my friend and I don’t want you hurt.”

His expression changed once more and Misty thought he might cry. Instead, he dipped his chin at her before he walked out to care for his cat friends. He took the key.

Summa hadn’t moved, and Misty wondered if he were still alive.

“Here,” said Sarah and began handing out the items.

Misty, who had once been shy about shedding her clothes in front of anyone, tore off the wet material and gratefully pulled a dry T- shirt over her head. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to get warm.

“We have the thermos with some hot chocolate left,” Paige said as she went through

the items in the tarp. She found the thermos and began sorting what they had. She handed out blankets before she lifted the heavy canvas material.

“Move close together. It will help us stay warm.” She patted her hand against her side like Simon had done. “Come on, Indra, you’ll help us stay warm too.”

The tiger didn’t seem to have a problem with the lion on the other side of the cage, and he walked toward Paige like he understood what she was saying. The four of them huddled beneath the tarp with Indra in front of their knees. Paige took a drink of hot chocolate and passed the plastic lid to Sarah, who swallowed some before she passed it to Misty.

“There’s a little left,” Misty said after she took her sip.

“See if Indra wants some,” said Paige.

Misty placed the cup in front of the large cat’s face, and his tongue came out and he tasted it. After two loud slurps, it was gone.

They heard the back metal door open, and the three of them poked their heads up from the tarp.

“I need to take care of Summa,” said Simon, looking worriedly at the lion .

“How can I help?” asked Misty, regretfully pulling the tarp away so she could stand.

“Stay in here and keep warm,” she told Paige and Sarah.

“Holler if you need us,” Paige said and pulled the tarp back over them.

Simon laid out the items he brought. Misty hated to ask, but the cat still hadn’t moved.

“Is he alive?” she whispered.

“His chest is still moving,” Simon told her. He pulled a tranquilizer dart from his pocket, though he struggled to get it out, and it took a moment before Misty knew what it was. He removed the cap and stabbed the dart into the cat’s front shoulder. Summa lifted his head, slightly and bared his teeth before he sank back and stared at the wall. He was going down fast from his wound, and they had to hurry. “You need to stitch him up,” said Simon. “I can’t get low enough. Can you?”

“Of course,” she said, though it scared her. Simon’s worry gave her courage. She really wanted his friend to be okay.

“Shave a small area here first.” He pointed at the large cat’s leg. “He needs to be on an IV before you start.” Simon handed her a razor. Misty would have never thought of it.

“Have you treated a knife wound before?” she asked.

“No, but the cats fight with sharp claws, and I’ve sewn them up plenty of times. At the hut, I can use a table to work on them.” He nodded at Summa. “If you hold the leg up, I think I can get the IV needle in. My knees are old, and they hurt me,” he explained as he hooked up a bag of fluids and looked for something to hold it. There was a hook to the right of the door about five feet off the ground. Simon placed the bag on the hook and checked the line. It would reach.

“I can do this,” Misty promised.

While biting her lip, she carefully shaved the area on Summa’s leg, checking to see the cat didn’t object. The rise and fall of his chest was minimal and she didn’t know if the lion would make it. She finished and moved to the area around the knife wound. There was a three-inch-long deep slice and what looked like a fairly deep puncture.

“Let me get the IV in,” said Simon when she removed the last of the fur in the way.
“When I’m done, you can stitch.”

He effortlessly inserted the IV and once again Misty was amazed at what he knew. When the needle was in the cat’s leg, Simon placed tape around it to hold everything in place. It was time for Misty. Her nerves were on edge, but she knew she could do it.

Simon handed her a large, rounded needle and the thread, though it was more like dental floss.

“I use this to stitch them because it dissolves and they don’t need to be removed. Jerry wouldn’t pay the cost for it, so I saved my money and Mrs. Miller from the library ordered it for me. ”

“Mrs. Miller sounds like a wonderful person,” Misty said.

“She is, and you would like Yolanda too. She’s married to Roberto and he does work on the island. They are my friends.”

“I’m glad you have them.”

He smiled and looked down at the cat. “Thread the needle and you’ll need to tie off each stitch so they hold. Be sure to grab enough skin so it doesn’t tear and cause the stitches to come out.”

“I can do it,” she assured him. “I’ve watched my mother do it before.”

Suddenly the cat’s entire body shuddered. He went still, his eyes open and staring into nothingness.

“Move!” yelled Simon.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Misty scooted out of the way. The cat had died, and she said a quick prayer even though her father would have slapped her for saying the words over an animal. She then watched as Simon did the most amazing thing. He went to the floor, pressed on the cat's chest, then covered its mouth and nose with his hands, and blew air into its lungs. He kept repeating the process, and Misty started to worry that the cat's death was more than Simon could handle.

She had no idea how much time passed before Simon lifted his head and waited. The cat's chest rose on its own .

"You did it," Misty said breathlessly. It was a miracle right before her eyes.

"The veterinarian tried to save a cub this way, and I remembered what he did."

"The cub didn't make it?" Misty asked sadly.

"No, and Summa might not either, but I had to try."

"He's breathing again, and I can stitch him up quickly. He has a chance because of you."

Simon tried to stand but he couldn't.

"I've got you," Misty said and stood to help him.

“We’ve got you.” Paige came up behind them with Sarah. Between the three of them, they helped Simon off the floor.

He looked embarrassed, but they acted like it was no big deal. Misty sat down beside the cat again, picked up the needle, and threaded it.

“Pour this on the needle and his wound before you start.” Simon handed her a bottle of disinfectant. “It should have been put on before I inserted the needle but I forgot. I won’t hit my head again because I’m stupid, I promise.”

“What if I add that you can’t call yourself stupid again?” Misty asked sternly.

Simon smiled at her and she went to work.

“I’ve sewn the cut, but now I’m at the puncture and it looks deep.”

“Squirt the bottle directly into the puncture,” Simon told her .

Misty followed his directions and used the rest of the disinfectant. She added several stitches to the punctured area before she was finally done. She leaned back against the wall with a loud sigh.

Sarah carried a blanket over and placed it around her shoulders.

“Thank you,” Misty said. She turned her focus to Simon again. “What’s the plan?”

“The plan?” he questioned.

“You have four of the lions here. How many others do you need to collect?”

It took him a moment, and then he ran through the cats who were loose. “There are

seven lions out there. I also need to find the tigers. There are two panthers, but they hide really well, and I'm more worried about the others. Some are not afraid of people, and they might walk up to the hunter without fear."

"Are you going after them?" she asked.

Simon looked away, and Misty wondered what was bothering him. "Do you need our help?" she finally asked when he didn't answer.

"The hunter wants to hunt me," he said softly, then looked down at her. "I want to find him first. Jerry, my boss, needs to be stopped too. He does horrible things to the cats. He took money from the hunters so they could kill one of the cats, and now he's paid Jerry more. Some of it is for you and Paige and Sarah. The rest is to hunt me." His eyes pleaded with her. "He shouldn't do that, should he?"

"No, Simon, he shouldn't do that." Something settled deep within Misty. There were so many things wrong with this entire situation. "We'll help you keep the cats safe."

"Shouldn't you ask us?" said Paige.

Misty turned to her, putting steel into her eyes and tone, ready for the confrontation. "You know there is no way to get out of this that keeps us from going back to that horrible place. We will be caught on the island. The only person who has helped is standing here risking his life for us. Do I really need to ask?"

Paige's chin went down, and air left her lungs before she looked up. "Why am I always so mean?" she asked.

Sarah placed her arm around Paige's shoulder. "It's okay because being mean is how you protect yourself."

“I don’t know. It just comes out.”

The two girls watched as Simon and Misty cared for Summa. They applied a bandage over his wound, and Misty bent forward and gently rubbed the large head.

“There’s a good boy,” she said. “You’ll be as good as new soon.” The lion didn’t move. She looked up and directed her next words to Paige. “The hunter wants us, and we are the perfect bait. I’ll go alone if I need to, but I’m helping Simon.”

“I’m helping too, and you can’t stop me,” said Sarah.

Paige rolled her eyes, and Misty knew she would slam the idea. She waited.

“If I don’t go, the two of you will do something stupid, and I’ll need to rescue you, so I’m going.” Paige’s stubbornness showed in her eyes.

Misty hid a smile. She was scared half out of her mind, but if they didn’t help Simon, the men would find them, and very bad things would happen. And what if that horrible man did hunt Simon? She couldn’t get the image of the terrifying outcome out of her head.

She glanced at Simon and asked again, “What’s your plan?”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt,” he said.

“You’re hurt, and so is Summa. They will do worse, and if that man caught you, what would happen to us? We need a plan.” She was taking this lesson from Paige, who had meticulously planned their escape until they stepped on the boat.

“They think you’re at the lighthouse. Maybe we could trap them inside?” Simon asked doubtfully.

He didn't want to hurt the hunter or Jerry but he would do it for them. Misty's thinking had changed after hearing that Simon would be hunted. They were on their own, and if they wanted to survive, it would be because they fought. Misty was tired of being abused. Her parents had done it, the school had done it, and now there were two bad men who wanted to do it again. She wasn't running this time, and she could see the same surety in Paige and Sarah's eyes.

"What about weapons?" asked Sarah.

"We have knives," Paige said, "and there's also the tranquilizer gun."

"There's only one gun," Sarah reminded her.

Misty turned to Simon. "You put Summa under using one of the darts. What if we each carried one in a pocket? Are there enough?"

"I brought extras," he answered, looking unsure.

"If we can get back to the lighthouse," Misty said, refusing to think of the cold, "we could get to the bad guys, and you wouldn't need to collect the lions and tigers right away."

Simon didn't answer, but Misty could tell he was thinking about it. Something changed in his expression. Very slowly, his lips curved into a smile. "If we got Jerry and the hunter to come here, we could lock them in one of the pens, and they couldn't get out."

Misty looked at the other two girls. Sarah shrugged, and Paige smiled after taking time to think about Simon's plan.

"I like it," she said. "We just need to figure out how to get them here."

It was Misty's turn to grin. "I have an idea."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Misty's plan was simple, but to catch Jerry and the hunter, they would need to prepare. Sarah said luck would help too. Simon wasn't sure about the luck part, but he still thought it might work.

The panther cage was located about two hundred yards from the lion pens. Simon didn't want the men held anywhere near the girls. If they managed to get Jerry and the hunter inside, they would be far enough away that he could breathe easier. The girls could choose where they wanted to stay for the remainder of the storm. They would probably choose the lighthouse for its warmth, and even then, Simon liked the idea the men being out of sight.

Each of the girls placed a dart in her pocket.

"Keep the plastic cap on, or you'll poke yourself and fall down," Simon told them.

"Fall down as in pass out and go night-night?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," he answered with a smile.

Girls weren't that bad once you got to know them. He wished he had known nice girls when he was younger. Even wet, they smelled good. He liked the smell of the cats, but girls had their own unique odor, and he would keep that to himself. They simply smelled clean.

She patted his hand. "I promise to be careful and leave the cap on unless I need it."

Simon wondered what would happen to them when this was over. Misty had mentioned going back to a school. It sounded like they ran away. It must have been a bad place. Like him, were they given away by their parents? No matter what, he would do everything he could to help them.

“I need to check the panther cage,” he said. “I’ll be back soon.”

They would be okay locked inside the pen, especially if they stayed out of sight. Simon didn’t know how much time they had before Jerry and the hunter figured out they weren’t at the lighthouse, so he needed to hurry.

The cold settling deep into his knees worried him. This had happened before, and it made walking difficult. His trips up and down the stairs at the lighthouse and carrying Summa had taken a toll and he didn’t want to tell the girls. There was nothing they could do about it anyway.

When he lived on the streets, there was always pain. It could be hunger or being attacked for a scrap of food. He’d learned to pay attention to his surroundings and never trust anyone. And when he’d been in pain, he mentally wrapped it into a tight ball and refused to think about it. That’s what he did now.

The hurricane was in full swing, and the wind blew so hard it almost toppled him. Palm fronds rained down around him, and he ducked his head several times to avoid the danger. He could only see a foot in any direction, so he turned toward the lion cages, and they were no longer visible.

If he got caught, he had to remember to throw the key far away so Jerry and the hunter couldn’t find it. He must protect the girls.

The short walk seemed so far, but he eventually found the pen. It was one of the older ones, and the enclosed back area wasn’t as big as the lion’s den. Simon didn’t care.

Jerry deserved worse. It would be perfect if Jerry had to live in one of the display pens for a week and receive the same abuse he gave the cats. The thought of paying customers gawking at his boss while he ate and went about his daily business of peeing in a corner and growling at the watchers made the sides of Simon's lips curl upward.

When he opened the back door to the den, his gaze tracked a small puddle of water gathered in the corner where the cement was uneven. Simon looked upward and noticed the wet area where the water dripped to the floor. The leak would need to be fixed soon. Sadness washed over him. It wouldn't be him helping Roberto. With a shake of his head, he stopped dwelling on the bad. He had things to do so the bad didn't become worse.

There was straw in the smaller den, but it wasn't spread around like it was in the pen where the girls waited. The straw was dry and away from the water. Jerry and the hunter could make do. They deserved worse.

He thought about the hunter he tossed down the rocks. Simon had never harmed anyone, and he should feel something. Did it make him bad because he didn't? Indra helped, but the tiger did what came naturally. Simon had done it on purpose. Jerry was a horrible person. Could he kill him? He wasn't sure, but if he could lock them into the panther cage until the storm was over, maybe an idea would come into his head. He'd had to figure out difficult things before, and sometimes it took a while. If the plan worked, he would have time to think everything through. If he couldn't save himself, maybe there was something he could do to help the girls. He walked from the enclosed portion of the cage and froze.

"They'll be in one of these," Jerry yelled over the storm and rattled the door. "There's no place else they could be."

"We can't see a damn thing in this downpour," the hunter replied.

“Well, I don’t see them in the back, so we can move on. The tiger cages are next.”

Simon had to reach the girls. He waited until Jerry and the hunter were far enough away before he unlocked the gate and shuffled out as fast as his knees would allow. He had to take the long way, or he would run into Jerry. His heart felt like it would burst from his chest, and his knees ached, but he pushed himself faster.

As he hurried, his foot struck a branch that had fallen, sending him sprawling forward. He barely had time to gasp before the ground rushed up to meet him. The cold, clammy muck squelched around his face, filling his mouth and nostrils as he lay there, stunned. He took a moment to make sure his body parts worked before he tried to push himself up. The weight of the mud sucked him downward.

“Looks like we found the dumb giant and we weren’t even looking for him yet,” the hunter said.

Simon tried to stand again. A sharp pain shot through his left knee. It felt like a bolt of lightning had struck the joint, radiating agony up and down his leg. He couldn’t give up. Every attempt to shift or stand magnified the pain. He gritted his teeth, trying to breathe, but getting upright was useless.

How would he save Indra and the girls?

The key, he had to hide it.

Searing agony filled his skull, and the world went black.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Misty, Paige, and Sarah used the time after Simon left to change back into their dry shirts. They kept their wet pants on in case they needed to leave quickly. It was cold, but Misty knew it could be worse.

She didn't start to worry about Simon until he was gone longer than she expected. He said he only had to check on the panther cage, and it felt like he had been gone an hour. Paige started casting sideways glances at her, but it was Sarah who spoke up.

"Simon should be back by now," she said.

Paige looked at Misty. "I'll go check on him. "

"No, it's safer here."

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," singsonged from outside.

Misty's eyes went huge. Sarah grabbed her hand.

"Shh," Misty said softly. "They can't know we're here."

"Check to see if the key is on him," one of the men said.

Misty crawled out of the den, staying low to the ground. The men stood at the gate, though they were hard to see. Something big was on the ground beside them. One of the men started doing something to the thing on the ground, and Misty heard a groan.

It was Simon. They hurt him.

“Check his pockets.”

“I’m trying. He’s too damn big for me to roll on my own. Why don’t you help?”

“I paid you for this,” the hunter said. “Once he wakes up, we’ll give him a head start, but I want to know those girls are waiting when I return.”

“You didn’t pay me enough to drag this sack of shit through the forest, but I helped. I can’t turn him over, and we need the key.”

Misty crawled back into the den.

“They have Simon, and they’re searching him for the key. He’s unconscious, but when he wakes up, the hunter is going to hunt him like an animal and kill him.” Her heart was beating so hard she thought it would explode. “We can’t let them hurt Simon.”

Indra gave a low growl and Sarah placed her hand on his back. His tail whooshed in agitation.

“We cooperate,” Paige said with a stubborn set of her jaw.

“What?” Sarah asked in surprise.

“If they have Simon, we can’t help him in here. We know nothing about the island, and he does. He has an advantage. If we give ourselves up, they might trust us.”

Misty stared at Paige. “You know what that man wants to do, don’t you?”

“Believe me, I know. If you want to help Simon, we need them to trust us or think we’re too scared to fight back.”

Misty looked at Sarah, and she nodded her head, though her fingers trembled where they rested on her thighs. With resolve that they could survive this, Misty turned back to Paige. “Let’s do it.”

There was no other way, and once the men found the key, it wouldn’t matter. But if the men trusted they wouldn’t fight back, Paige was right, and it could be their only chance. Misty ran to their wet clothes and put her shirt and jacket back on. The lion was still unconscious and hadn’t moved. She went to Indra.

“You need to stay in here,” she told him softly, looking into his eyes, hoping he understood the urgency. She wrapped her arms around his huge neck and leaned in. “We’ll help Simon, please trust me.” Indra blinked slowly before going to his haunches.

Scared out of her mind over what they were about to do, Misty stepped out of the den, back into the rain, and waved her hands.

“We’re in here, and we’re freezing. Help us, please.”

“Good one,” Paige whispered from inside the den.

“Do you have a key?” the older man yelled. He was the one Simon called Jerry.

“No, Simon took it, and we can’t get out. You said there was someplace warm. We want to be warm.”

“Check him again,” said the hunter.

“Then help roll,” Jerry demanded angrily.

They grunted as they pushed Simon to his back. Misty worried he would drown because the rain was coming down so hard.

“I found it,” said Jerry.

“Help me roll him back so he doesn’t drown. I want my hunt,” the other man said.

Misty heard the gate rattle before it swung open.

“Thank you. Please don’t hurt us. We just want to be warm.” She raised the pitch of her voice so she sounded desperate hoping the men believed her .

“Get the other girls out here,” the hunter said.

Paige and Sarah stepped out. They had also changed into their wet clothes. Simon groaned again and moved slightly.

“I think he’s waking up,” Jerry said.

The hunter walked quickly to Simon and kicked him in the head. He went still. Misty almost cried out but stopped herself.

“I don’t like him,” Paige said in a whiny voice, nodding her chin at Simon. “He gives me the creeps.”

The hunter walked up to her and slid wet hair from her face. He pinched her chin and lifted her head so their eyes met. “You made a good choice, and you won’t need to put up with him again.”

“Thank you,” she all but cried while smiling gratefully.

Did Paige take acting lessons? She was really good at this.

“Help me drag the dummy into the cage, and we’ll lock him in,” the hunter told Jerry. “We’ll get the girls into your apartment, and I’ll come back out here once they’re settled.”

They proceeded to drag Simon into the pen and lock it behind them. They didn’t check the den, and Indra didn’t come out or growl. If Simon woke up, the other items they brought with them could keep him warm.

The girls trudged along behind the men as they made their way slowly to the apartment. They were halfway there when the wind and rain died. The forest went still, the pressure in the air was all that increased. A patch of clear sky shone above them with a dark wall holding back the wind and rain. It formed a circle around them. An eerie feeling came over Misty and she rubbed her arms.

“That’s so strange,” Sarah said, looking upward at the still sky.

“We’re in the eye of the storm,” the hunter volunteered.

Nothing moved in their small world.

“It will get worse again,” said Jerry. “We need to get to my apartment. Hurry.”

They moved at a faster pace. The lights of the apartment came into view, and a giant wall of wind and rain hit them. Misty went to her knees. The hunter hit a tree but stayed upright. Jerry grabbed Paige and Sarah and brought them in close to his chest.

“A little further,” he yelled.

Misty put her eyes on the lights, stood, and moved one foot then another.

Sarah cried out. "I'm okay," she said after a few seconds.

All Misty could do was keep her head down and go forward. She was too afraid and didn't feel the cold like she had before. They were going to die on this island. If the hunter or Jerry didn't kill them, the storm would. Rain mixed with tears.

"Inside," Jerry said and placed his hand on her arm, pushing her into the apartment.

The girls collapsed in a heap once they were out of the rain. The place wasn't warm exactly, but it was ten times better than being outside.

"There's the heater," Jerry said and pointed to the corner on the far side of the room.

Slowly, the girls got up and moved to the small bit of warmth.

"This feels so good," Sarah whispered a moment after they put their hands close.

"I'll make them something warm to drink," Jerry told the hunter.

The man ran his eyes over the girls, and Misty shivered. He looked at them like they were a juicy piece of steak. It creeped her out.

"Get them warm. Maybe showers so they're cleaned up by the time I return." He said the words to Jerry, then turned back to the girls. "I want you dry and clean for the party we're going to have." He reached his arm out, and his fingers closed around the upper part of Paige's arm. "You'll be good girls, won't you?"

Misty had to physically keep her jaw from dropping when Paige reached out and ran her fingers over his hand. "If you keep us dry and warm, I'll give you anything you

want.” Her voice was deep and provocative.

The hunter smiled. “Call me, Dale.”

“Hurry back, Dale,” dripped from Paige’s lips as she smiled up at him .

Dale turned his head and looked at the other two. “We’re going to have a party, and I’ll treat you girls so good, you’ll want to come with me when I leave.” He laughed at his own joke.

Ice fingers crawled up Misty’s spine at the look in his eyes.

They had to save Simon before they saved themselves.

Chapter Twenty- Eight

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon's head hurt, and he moaned when a scratchy tongue ran over his wet face. Indra swiped his cheek and nose again, and Simon opened his eyes. Rain ran into them, and he rolled to his knees, which ached horribly. He gritted his teeth and crawled through the door to the den. The small opening rubbed hard against his sides, and he didn't think he would fit, but with a last push, he made it through.

Inside, he rolled to his back and moved his legs out of the way so Indra could get in. He was in the lion den, but the girls were not. He hadn't thrown the key, and he silently berated himself for not keeping the girls safe.

"Stupid Simon, stupid Simon." He lifted his hand and almost slammed his palm against the side of his head, but he remembered what Misty had told him, so he didn't hit himself. He shouldn't have said the "stupid" word either, but it was too late. He had to think, but first, he had to get on his feet.

The burn in his knee was so bad he didn't know if it would hold him. Using the side of the wall, he got his better leg beneath him and rose slowly until he was upright. He couldn't think of the pain. He needed to find the girls.

Summa started to stir, and he walked over to the lion.

"How you doing, boy?" he asked.

The cat's eyes opened and closed a few times before they stayed open. He lay unmoving, but he was awake. The hunter had found the girls here. They'd left their things behind. The men hadn't entered the den, or they would have seen the cats.

Simon tried to clear the fog from his head and shook it once and then again. Where would they take the girls? Jerry's apartment. It was the only place.

Simon was unsure what to do with the lion. Indra would help if he could, but Summa was unpredictable, and he wasn't in good shape.

"Can you get up, boy?" Simon asked.

The cat didn't stir. Simon, unable to go to his knees, gently nudged the cat with his boot until Summa showed his fangs. After a few minutes, he still wasn't up, and Simon knew he needed to leave him.

"Indra, you're coming with me. We need to get the girls back, and you can help."

The tiger made a deep chuffing noise in his throat before he added a growl.

Years before, Simon had hidden a key in each pen because he'd been locked inside once after one of the panthers ate the key. He'd forgotten about it but didn't call himself stupid this time. The spare was hidden beneath the hay in the corner of the den, but it took him a few minutes to find it because he was unable to go to his knees and had to use his foot. Finally, he saw it. With the wall's help, he managed to bend low enough to pick up the flat metal. He and Indra left through the full-sized door at the back of the den and were immediately blasted by rain.

Simon had just stepped onto the path when a bullet hit the tree next to him.

"I'll give you a fifteen-minute head start," the hunter yelled. "If the tiger attacks, I'll

kill it. I would use the time if I were you.”

“What did you do with the girls?” Simon yelled back.

“They’re with your boss. Don’t worry about them. I’m coming after you.”

“If you hurt them, I’ll kill you.” Simon’s rage was building. This man would not hurt his friends. He bent low and shouted, “Run,” to Indra and slapped his flank. The tiger disappeared into the forest.

“The clock is ticking,” the hunter yelled.

Simon slipped into the forest too. He had to get to the girls. He shuffled about fifty yards, favoring his bad knee, and stopped. The hunter would know where Simon was headed because he’d practically told him when he asked about the girls. He looked around. The rain was a steady downward stream, but the wind wasn’t as strong, and visibility was better than it had been earlier. He had to go where the hunter wouldn’t suspect. An idea formed in his head, and he hoped for once his brain was working like a smart person.

Simon took two steps and stopped again. Carla stood about six feet away. He knew there was no way to get the cat into a pen without putting him and the cat in more danger.

“Where’s Tibby?” he whispered.

The cat blinked and stayed calm. Simon was unsure what to do. He took one large step away from the cat and froze when she growled. Simon lifted his arms and waved them around his body and over his head. At the same time, he yelled loudly, hoping the hunter couldn’t hear it over the storm. He didn’t want Carla or Tibby stepping out to greet the man. The cats would die.

How much time had passed? He wasn't sure, but he figured half his time was up, and he had to get away from Carla now. The cat shied to the right at Simon's comic antics, and then Simon gave a roar similar to what he heard from the male lions, and Carla bolted. Tibby was the shyer of the two and had to be close by. Hopefully, he'd scared them both off.

Simon shuffled faster. He tried to be careful in the slippery mud but stumbled a couple of times. He managed to stay upright, and his knee held. He made it to the utility shed that held Roberto's equipment. The inside was stuffy and warm, though it didn't matter because Simon had to hurry.

Roberto kept the shed organized, and he had no problem finding the things he needed. He heard a scratch on the door and knew it was Indra before he opened it. The tiger slipped inside while Simon worked.

Before he left, Simon sat in the only chair inside the shed. Indra moved in close, and Simon petted his head and scratched the ruff of his neck.

"I need you to stay here out of sight," he told him. "That is a bad man, and he will hurt you. I have no way to keep you hidden. If you'll do this for me, I'll make sure he never hurts another animal."

Simon figured killing someone was easier than thinking about it, so he wouldn't think about it. He didn't want to intentionally hurt anyone, but they'd left him no option. He would need to stop Jerry too. With determination running through his veins, Simon left the shed, closing the door on Indra, who looked at him with forlorn eyes.

Simon stayed as low to the ground as he could with the bad knee. He made his way toward Jerry's, listening over the storm for signs of the hunter. He moved cautiously until he found the perfect spot to hunker down. It wasn't easy, but he managed to get low and find a comfortable position.

To wait.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

After Dale left, Jerry appeared uncomfortable. His weaselly voice made it worse.

“Do you want to take showers?” He didn’t make direct eye contact. It was like there was something he should be ashamed of. There was.

“I don’t need a full shower, but I would like to clean up,” Paige said. “Where’s the bathroom?” The cadence of her voice was still syrupy sweet, and she sounded so different.

Misty was unsure what to think. This Paige showed confidence and something else that Misty couldn’t name.

“Come on, girlfriends,” Paige said. “Let’s get dry.” She turned to Jerry. “By any chance, do you have something we could wear?”

“There are clothes in the gift shop,” he said. “I can’t leave you alone, so if you want to grab them first, it would be easier.”

“Do we need to get cold and wet again?” Paige asked.

“No, there’s a back hallway that will get us there.”

Paige smiled, but it wasn’t her normal one. It was like everything about her had changed, from the way she walked and spoke to the way she talked. This was a Paige she had never seen, and Misty had no idea what purpose there was for the new

friendlier persona.

They had only a short hallway to cross to get to the gift shop. It had shirts, lightweight parkas, and shorts.

Paige ran her hand down the length of the shorts. “I can cut these if dinglenuts has scissors,” she whispered.

No, Misty wouldn’t laugh at what her friend called Jerry, but it was hard. The shorts looked good to her, and she had no idea what Paige was talking about. The clothes all had the island’s emblem, and they carried them back to the apartment and headed to the bathroom where Jerry pointed after he gave Paige a pair of scissors.

“I want these back,” he said .

The tip of the scissors was rounded and really posed no safety risk, and Paige rolled her eyes. “As soon as I’m changed.”

“You should go in one at a time,” Jerry said, looking between the girls.

Paige’s voice turned sassy again. “If there isn’t a window, what do you have to be afraid of?” Twirling a section of damp hair around her finger and cocking her hip, she continued before Jerry replied, “Even if there is a window, we’re tired of being cold, and the last place we want to be is outside.” Paige smiled like she had a great secret and pointed at Misty and Sarah. “They may not share my excitement, but I’m looking forward to Dale’s party.” Her lashes swept slowly up then down while her lips formed a grin that invited bad things.

Jerry’s eyes grew large, and his smile was disturbing, but he allowed them to enter the bathroom together and close the door behind them. The small, dingy room had pale green paint on the walls with mold on the ceiling and in the corners. It didn’t

smell great either.

Paige immediately pulled back the grimy shower curtain and turned the shower on.

“Are you getting in?” Misty asked while looking inside the small space at the additional mold.

“No, but this way we can talk, and that jerk can’t hear us.”

“You’re acting strange,” Sarah said, giving her a quizzical look.

“I know, but when it comes to these men, they’re like the ones on the street. Smile and be nice, and they’ll give you anything you ask.”

“They want more than nice and a smile,” Misty said stubbornly.

Paige squinted her eyes, and her fingers curled into fists. “Look, Miss Prissy Pants, if it gets us off the island, I’ll do it.”

Misty gasped. “How could you?”

“How do you think girls survive on the street? Did you think we would sell flowers on some corner? What about your pastor who wants you as his wife? You don’t think it’s for companionship, do you? He wants the same thing they all want, and it’s the last thing I want to give them, but we may have no other choice.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Sarah said with a confused shake of her head.

“Do you know where babies come from?” Paige asked with exasperation.

Sarah's eyes grew large, and her mouth formed the same sound she made, "Oh."

Paige looked back at Misty. "I'm not returning to the school."

Misty knew she couldn't do what Paige was saying, but she also knew she couldn't fault Paige's thinking. She didn't want to go back either.

"Look," said Paige. "If I put out and make him happy, you may not need to. I can do this."

Misty took her fingers and squeezed them in solidarity. Paige's eyes welled before she turned away. It would hurt Paige if she had to take this step, and Misty didn't know what she could do to stop it.

"If the two of you aren't going to use the hot shower, I am," said Sarah. She shucked her clothes and climbed in, not caring about the mold. A minute later, she gave a loud moan, and Misty almost decided to risk the fungus, but the sour smell hit again.

Jerry knocked. "You're taking too long. Hurry."

Paige got to work on her new shorts, and all Misty could do was watch as she cut an indecent length off. "I dress like this on the street all the time. People actually wear clothes like this to go to a mall. There's nothing wrong with it and there is no reason to be ashamed of our bodies. It's another lie they tell us," Paige insisted.

Misty had never been to a mall, but she'd heard her mother and father complain about the clothes teenagers wore. The indecent show of arms and legs was something her father ranted about all the time. These girls were trying to tempt good God-fearing men, and he would go on and on. Misty never understood why a God-fearing man would be tempted, and one day, when she had some crazy braveness take over, she asked him. The imprint of his hand on her face remained throughout the day, and the

bruise lasted several.

Sarah climbed out of the shower and put the dry clothes on while Misty and Paige washed up in the small sink. Out of the corner of her eye, Misty saw Paige slip the pocketknife Simon gave her into the pocket of her new shorts. She felt better that Paige had a weapon if she needed to defend herself.

Being dry made all the difference, and Misty felt so much better, though tired. She didn't think she would ever sleep in a warm bed again. Sleep in general wasn't on their calendar.

They stared at their reflection in the mirror once they were dressed in the new clothes. Bedraggled and exhausted, they'd come a long way since leaving the school. Sarah's cheeks were bright pink and chaffed. Her hair stuck up in odd places, and she used her fingers to get out the tangles and tame it a bit. Paige smoothed hers down using a few sprinkles of water to help with the drying kinks. The shorts held Misty's attention and she wondered if she would ever be brave enough to wear something like that. She really wasn't sure if they would survive. If they did, she accepted that they would be returned to the school. Simon and his cats were the important ones. They couldn't let the bad things happen.

Paige smiled saucily into the mirror and pursed her lips, making kissing noises. "I'm ready," she declared before opening the door, releasing a cloud of steam. They walked straight to the heater.

"You said you might have something warm to drink?" Paige asked, her sultry tone in place.

"It's cider, and it's heating on the stove. I'll make you each a cup." Jerry's eyes traveled over Paige, and his Adam's apple bobbed before he looked away.

Misty hoped Paige truly knew what she was doing. Jerry was keeping them happy for the hunter, even Misty could figure that out. He'd taken money so Dale could hurt them, and that was just as bad as doing it himself. Simon also said Jerry abused the cats. That made him almost worse in her head.

The cider was hot, and they had to let it cool a bit, but the cup in each of their hands was warm, and that was what mattered most. Her mind jumped from scenario to scenario as she drank. It didn't matter what she planned, it quickly dissolved into nothing once she thought it through.

The door to the apartment opened suddenly, slamming against the wall with a crack. Dale stood in the doorway.

"Has that idiot come here?" he demanded, his words clipped and his expression said he wanted to hurt someone. Thunder sounded behind him in the open door.

Simon was in the storm, but that meant he was okay after being kicked in the head. Misty hated the thought of him being alone with the thunder, but she knew he had Indra. Silently, she blew out a relieved breath.

"I haven't seen him," Jerry said. "If you can't find him, check the cages or maybe the lighthouse. And for God's sake, close that door."

Dale slammed it. "What do you think I've been doing?" he snapped. His eyes landed on Paige, and they grew larger as he ran his tongue over his lips. "You clean up real nice," he said gruffly, his eyes taking another sweep of her body, though slower this time.

"You're the one that insisted on going after the dummy," Paige shot back with a grin. "I've been here waiting."

The hunter's eyes went to the door and then back to Paige. "You can come with me when I leave this place, but if I don't get that giant now, I'll lose the opportunity."

Paige sauntered closer. "Your loss, but hurry. My friends need off the island, but if you have room for me, I'm yours."

The hunter leaned in and placed his hand on Paige's breast. He kissed her. Misty turned her head because she thought she would be sick. Paige's husky reply made it worse.

"Hurry back, Dale."

The hunter stepped away and looked at the other two girls, his gaze staying on Sarah for an extra-long moment. He walked forward suddenly and grabbed her arm.

"Bait," he growled. "You're coming with me."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Simon

Simon had watched the hunter enter Jerry's apartment. The cold settled into a deep ache that didn't help the pain in his knees. He'd almost spilled from his hiding spot and attacked, but something held him back. He knew he didn't have much energy left, and with his knees, he would be lucky to get one shot. Now was not the time.

He had to take out Jerry and the hunter to keep the girls safe, and he was no longer questioning the decision. He was trying not to think of what would happen to him or the cats, especially Indra. His stomach felt queasy over the thought of never seeing his friends again.

Waiting was the worst, and he wished he could get it over with. Maybe the hunter would kill him. For the girls' sake, Simon hoped he didn't.

Several minutes later, the door to the apartment opened. Simon's body stiffened when the hunter tossed Sarah to the ground outside. She sprawled in the mud and curled into a tight ball, her shoulders shaking.

"Stop!" screamed Paige. "I'll be bait and come with you. I want that dumb guy gone as much as you do."

Dumb guy? Had Simon heard her right?

"Sarah likes the stupid giant," Paige continued. "I want to help you catch him."

The hunter laughed at her. "I'm not going to catch him; I'm going to put a bullet in

his heart.”

“Only his heart? Mine would take him in the head.” She pointed at Sarah. “She won’t help, but I will. Take me with you, and we’ll find him together, big guy.”

Simon didn’t know what to think. He hadn’t liked Paige in the beginning, but she’d grown nicer. Was it an act? Did she hate him?

Simon stayed frozen because he didn’t know if he wanted the answers. Dale grabbed Paige’s arm and brought her in close, whispering something in her ear, but Simon couldn’t hear. Misty came out and helped Sarah to her feet. They were both crying. Dale said something to them, and Misty helped her back into the apartment. The hunter took Paige away.

Jerry was now Simon’s first target.

Simon left his hiding place, which was within twenty feet of Jerry’s apartment. He’d used synthetic plants from the storage room. They made good camouflage, and, even with his size, the weather and cover allowed him to hide in plain sight.

He limped around to the back and looked into the window. Thankfully, Jerry’s apartment was recessed away from the open area and sheltered by the other two buildings. They hadn’t boarded up the windows. The lights were kept on by the generator. If Jerry was running heat inside, the gasoline in the generator wouldn’t last long, but that didn’t matter now.

Simon looked in the window, which was the only bedroom, but he didn’t see Sarah or Misty. He didn’t see Jerry either, so he decided to go back to the front. He tried the door handle, and it was unlocked.

This was it. He needed to hurt Jerry so he couldn’t hurt anyone else. Simon pushed

through the door. Jerry stood a few feet away, and Simon didn't give him time to say anything before he swung his fist and caught Jerry upside the head. He fell to the floor with a loud thunk.

"Simon," Sarah cried, her face wet with tears. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck .

"He has Paige," she said. "Paige is acting like she's his friend because we had to find you, and now you found us."

Maybe Paige didn't hate him. "Where were they going?"

Misty answered, "She saved Sarah because he was going to use her as bait to draw you out."

"I'll go after him," Simon said. "I'll move Jerry into one of the cages we have in this section of the island. He can stay there until after the storm. I'll lock you in one of the pens too, and you can wait out the storm with the key so he can't get to you." Simon wasn't sure what he would do with Jerry, but he wanted the girls left out of it.

Misty nodded her head and took Sarah's arm to draw her away from Simon.

Simon lifted Jerry's foot, but before he could drag him, the door flew open.

Dale pointed the gun at Simon's chest. Paige looked terrified and struggled to get Dale's hand from her wrist. He backhanded her with the gun, and she hit the doorjamb before she crumpled on the floor and didn't move.

"You had your chance," Dale told Simon. "How did it feel when you threw my friend over the cliff? Did excitement run through your veins? I feel it now, even though you weren't a very good hunt." Spit sprayed from his mouth. He looked over his shoulder

at Paige before he met Simon's eyes again. "This one thought I was stupid like you. If she were a little nicer, she wouldn't get hurt." He nudged Paige with his boot, but she didn't move.

Simon took a step toward Dale.

"Stop there." His gun turned toward Sarah. "This kid doesn't interest me." He met Simon's eyes again. "You will do exactly as I say, or I'll shoot her. I want a head trophy for my wall, and you're going to get it for me. I can't take your head, and I want that tiger."

Simon couldn't allow him to hurt anyone else. He bent low and charged.

Dale fired the gun.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Time slowed. Even Misty's scream sounded long and drawn out, not quite real. Simon slammed into the hunter, and they both fell on Paige, who still hadn't moved. A moan sounded, and she looked down to see Jerry lying on the floor with a hand to his chest, his eyes filled with pain.

"He had to kill all of us or he would go to prison." He coughed. "Couldn't let that happen." Blood pooled beneath him.

A cry of rage filled the apartment, and Misty turned. The hunter had managed to get away from Simon and now had the gun pointed at him again. His sneer would stay with Misty for a long time. His arm lifted an inch higher.

"Everything here is mine, and I'm taking it. You and your precious cats can rot in hell."

Dale slammed forward, Indra on his back, his large teeth going around Dale's neck. His scream held terror and knowledge. Bones crunched, the horrible sound filling the room. The scream died suddenly, and all that was left were the sounds of the hurricane.

"Indra," Simon said softly, drawing the cat's attention toward him. "Are you okay, boy?"

The tiger growled, his mouth still around Dale's neck.

“Don’t move,” Simon told Misty and Sarah.

“What about Paige?” Misty whispered.

“I’m squished like a pancake but awake,” Paige said. “I’m not moving.”

Slowly, Simon approached Indra and placed his hand on the tiger’s back. Almost carefully, Indra dropped the hunter and rubbed his head against Simon’s side.

“I need help,” Jerry said, his voice cracked with pain.

Simon’s eyes landed on his boss. This was the man who rescued him so many years before. He’d given Simon responsibility and taught him to care for the cats. He’d also abused them. Simon remembered the mothers’ and babies’ cries when they were separated. He remembered the sounds of gunfire when the hunters came to the island. After their pictures with the savage beast they murdered, they left the body and took the head. How many headless cats were buried here?

Jerry had needed someone who wouldn’t ask questions or challenge his illegal activities. He’d found that person in the huge man who couldn’t read or write and was slowly starving on the streets. Jerry was a horrible person. Simon bent down and scooped up Dale’s gun.

“Misty, Sarah, Paige, go into the bedroom and close the door.” He leveled the gun at Jerry.

“You don’t want to do this,” Jerry said, the whine in his voice turned on high.

“You are a very bad man. You hurt the cats. The cubs are taken from their mothers; other cats are hunted. You lied to me from the beginning, and I didn’t understand what an evil person you were. You wanted more money just for you. You could

always feed the cats, but you like hurting them.” Simon shook his head, his grip steady, his entire being focused on Jerry and what had to be done.

A hand landed on Simon’s wrist, and he looked down into Misty’s eyes. Her soft smile made his heart clench.

“Please go into the bedroom,” he said.

“It’s okay, Simon. I have an idea.”

“He’s a bad man,” Simon repeated.

“I know he is, but you said he had money.”

“He does. He’s rich, and his wife is rich. They own a big house that twenty people could live in. ”

Misty squatted close to Jerry. “Do you need this island?”

“What do you mean, do I need it? Are you stupid?”

“No, Mr. Jerry, I am not. You are. Simon is going to kill you, and we will watch. When the authorities come, we will say the hunter shot you. We will also tell them that you sold us to the hunter and you also sold Simon.”

“What the hell?” Jerry said with a moan. “I saved you and now I’m going to die of this damn gunshot wound. What do you want?”

“We want you to give Simon the sanctuary.”

Jerry laughed and then groaned again. “That will never happen,” he coughed out.

Misty took a step back, turned, and looked at Simon. Very directly, she said, “You can shoot him. We won’t tell.”

“Wait,” Jerry screamed. “You can’t just shoot me. What about your precious animals?” He laughed again. “My wife will get this place and let it go to ruin. She’ll sell off all your cats for the money.” He looked at Misty and then back at Simon. “We can work together. You can be my business partner. I won’t take money from any more hunters. You have my word.”

“His word is no good,” Paige said. “You’re right, Simon. He is a very bad man. I agree with Misty. You need to kill him. We have time to plan a story. ”

“No, stop,” Jerry begged. “I’ll do anything.”

“Give Simon the sanctuary, and you can live,” Misty said.

“Okay. If that’s what you want. I can’t believe you seriously think this dumb shit can run this island.”

“Thank you for the great idea, Mr. Jerry.” It was Sarah’s turn now. “You can write a large check to give Simon a chance. I think he should shoot you, though.”

Paige laughed softly, and Misty grinned. They’d gone through too much together, and they were on the same page. She didn’t think Simon would shoot Jerry but the threat worked with her help.

Misty brought Jerry pen and paper after he told her where to find them. His checkbook wasn’t necessary because he had money in his safe. He said it was over \$50,000. Simon said very little as Jerry wrote out the agreement to turn the sanctuary over. He signed it and fell back onto the floor. He had a shoulder wound, and even though he cried like a baby, he wasn’t going to die.

“You helped him,” Jerry pleaded to Misty. “You can help me. If I die, no one will believe that paper.”

“What about the hunter?” Paige asked, ignoring Jerry. Indra sniffed around the body and started to drag it outside.

“In the wild, Indra would eat him,” Simon explained.

“He deserves it and so does Indra. I say let him do what comes naturally.”

Simon’s gaze met Misty’s and she shrugged.

“I’m okay as long as I don’t need to watch.” She knew exactly what she was saying. Her time at the school and on the island had changed her. She never wanted to be the naive girl who stayed quiet out of fear for her parents and brother as she was carried out of her house by strange men again. If she had to return to the school, she would be like Paige and run as soon as she got the chance.

“When Indra is finished, I’ll throw the rest of him down the rocks where the other hunter landed.”

“I’m okay with it too, but I’m with Misty and don’t want to watch,” Sarah said. “He was a bad person, and Indra deserves a treat.” Her eyes held a hardness that hadn’t been there before.

Misty understood completely. They were now like Paige. They had realized the hard way that life wasn’t easy, but to make it, they had to be brave and take chances.

“He’ll drag the body away before he eats,” Simon told Sarah. Indra proceeded to leave with his prize. Simon pointed the gun at Jerry again. “He’s lying. He’ll make up something and tell the police we’re responsible. They’ll believe him.”

“That’s not true.” He held his good arm up. “My wife and I were selling this place,” Jerry said desperately. “There’s paperwork in my desk. I’ll tell her I sold it to you. I’ve hidden all the money the hunters paid me, and I’ll put it in our account.” His eyes grew more desperate. “She won’t know where it came from. I hate it here. I hate the cats. You can have it,” he cried as he begged.

Misty’s hand went back to Simon’s wrist. “You don’t want to do this. We’ll back you, but killing is a sin, and you will pay the price for eternity.”

Simon didn’t really know anything about sin, but he liked Misty and he lowered the gun.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:45 pm

Savage Sanctuary Island, Misty

Three years later,

Misty carried the bucket of food to one of their newest rescues. It was another tiger like Indra. This one had also been raised by a private owner, and he didn't mind people. Simon's words rang in her head. "Until the cat accepts you, they can't be trusted. After they accept you, it's by their rules."

It was a good lesson, and she had all her fingers to prove she listened.

Jerry had turned the sanctuary over to Simon, but it hadn't solved their problems. It took the entire day after the storm to figure out half the things they had going against them. The island was isolated and provided safety for the cats. Visitors stayed within the fenced areas. There was no reason the three girls couldn't stay. That had been the main accomplishment of their extra day before the real world invaded.

When visitors arrived at the sanctuary, the girls remained out of sight, at least for the first year. The change in their appearance also helped them come out of their shell. Suntans and additional food turned them into young women who belonged on the island, even though they were still too young. Slowly, they felt comfortable helping Simon with the cats and all the other needs the sanctuary had. When visitors saw them, it was as the family who owned the place.

Simon was their combination uncle and father. He taught them to care for the cats, but Misty doubted they would ever know as much as he did. They called him Uncle Simon for the visitors, and it stuck.

Six months after their arrival, Paige left with only a note on her bed so they wouldn't worry.

"You and Sarah love it here, but I want to see the world. I may come visit sometime. Take care of Simon and Indra for me, P."

It saddened Misty, but that was Paige. If it weren't for her, their lives would have been horrible. Misty couldn't fault her friend for going after her dreams.

Within a year of Jerry signing over the sanctuary, he was charged with felonies pertaining to his illegal wildlife trade. He took a plea and went to prison quickly. The authorities looked at the island but Jerry hadn't been in control and they found nothing. Simon made sure the sanctuary abided by state and federal law. He cared about each animal in their possession and he reveled in the responsibility.

As for Sarah, she was awesome. Under Simon's tutelage, she'd all but taken over the cat's medical care. Simon checked out books at the library that taught about veterinary health. Sarah studied with Simon each evening and took notes talking about individual cats and their health needs. Sarah actually had steadier fingers than Misty when it came to stitching wounds.

They no longer placed more than three cats in the enclosures at a time. Attacks and injuries were rare now, but they happened. Indra was their cat ambassador. Simon placed a collar on him and attached a leash to walk him around the visitor center. He was a crowd favorite.

There was another change. Simon learned to read, and each night, he brought them into his world of discovery. They gathered around to listen to his deep voice that lulled them into an endless feeling of peace. He rarely stumbled over words, but when he did, he would smile and ask for the correct pronunciation before going on. He had saved them, and it was something they would never forget. He knew it too and it added to his confidence. Simon was possibly the smartest person Misty had ever

known and now that he'd come out of his shell, others knew it too. He had slowly gained respect in the cat rehabilitation zone and turned their Sanctuary into one of the best in the country.

Misty had never seen a sign of the hunter's body that Indra dragged away, and she didn't ask Simon about it. After what they had suffered that night, she, Paige, and Sarah were bloodthirsty and she was okay with their feelings of vengeance. Misty would never apologize. They had survived. It wasn't something they spoke of, and that was okay too.

Paige was wrong about the cats having a taste for human flesh because Indra never showed a sign that he thought humans tasted better than his meals. He'd protected them, and Misty counted him as one of her best friends.

Turning Savage Sanctuary into a good place for the cats took a lot of work. They couldn't have done it without Mrs. Miller's help. They'd told her the truth about the girls' home and running away from the abuse, though they kept the story of the dead hunters to themselves. If it weren't for her, their idea to hide on the island wouldn't have worked.

Mrs. Miller was determined they would earn their GEDs so they could go to college if they wanted to. She encouraged Sarah to keep learning about the cats and study to be a veterinarian when she was old enough. Misty thought it would happen in a few years.

Misty had missed Paige so much the first year, but then Caitlyn arrived. She'd brought a note with her.

"She's like us, and she needs help. Our secrets will be safe with her, P."

Caitlyn was a year older than Sarah, and she looked like she would blow away in a strong wind. Paige had found her on the streets after she'd run away from home.

Caitlyn brought a package of attitude with her. It took a few months before she accepted that she was no longer in danger and she could let her guard down. Caitlyn took over the care of the smaller cats, who she was more comfortable with. The only other cat she liked was Indra. He'd followed her around like a lovesick puppy when she first arrived. She tried to hide from him due to her fear, but it never worked. Finally, when it looked as if the tiger would die of a broken heart, she accepted the friendship, and Indra only left her side for time with Simon.

They now lived in the apartments. Misty had her own, and Sarah and Caitlyn shared one. Simon also moved out of the hut so he could be closer to the girls for protection.

For Misty's part, she handled the business end of the sanctuary with Mrs. Miller's help. The money Jerry gave them didn't last long, and the island bills had stacked up. They made plans to bring in more money that included Indra's promotion to ambassador and a more educational experience at the sanctuary. Their donations increased steadily with media exposure that Mrs. Miller handled. She was more than the mainland librarian; she was an ally for all of them including the cats.

The biggest new addition to the island was the chapel. Misty had opened the idea of using it for weddings, and everyone agreed. The building seated fifty people, and they kept the island jungle theme throughout. When you entered, it gave a peaceful feeling no matter your beliefs. They had their first couple scheduled for the following week. Indra now had a bowtie and would be front and center for the wedding photos. The chapel would bring in money, but it also filled a place in Misty's heart. She thought differently about religion now and had let go of many teachings she'd grown up with. But she needed the peace the chapel brought.

They no longer allowed live feedings for extra money. Misty had been horrified when Simon told her about them. But they needed money and their largest endeavor would come available the following year. They were building a nature walk that would allow the cats to roam free while visitors walked in safety around the island. They were adding a few huts for the true experience of living and working with the cats.

They would offer training classes and also make people pay for the experience so they could rescue more animals in need.

None of this would have been possible without Yolanda and Roberto. They remained a fixture and took the fourth apartment unit, so they no longer lived on the mainland. Yolanda spoiled all of them. She cooked and kept their apartments clean even when they told her they could clean up after themselves. She nodded and did as she pleased. She was the mother to all and they loved her.

The past three years were the best in Misty's life, and starting today, she had a clear future in front of her. This was her eighteenth birthday. No one could return her to her parents or that horrible school. She'd counted down to this special day, and finally, it arrived.

They only opened the island on weekends for general visitors, and it was Tuesday, so she took her time. She went to check on the new cubs born to one of the lions. There were four, and when they were old enough, they had zoos waiting. The zoos paid good money, and it helped the bottom line. Misty researched the facilities diligently before they signed agreements. They would not be removed until the mother turned them away from nursing, and that was still weeks from now .

The cubs slept with their mom, their fuzzy bodies piled on top of one another. She smiled and headed to the hut for another bucket.

"Surprise."

Misty stopped inside the hut and stared. Her friends had covered the place in birthday streamers, and Yolanda had baked a cake that rested on the prep table with a stack of paper plates and plastic forks beside it.

Misty laughed. They had done this in the time it took her to feed one hungry tiger and check on the cubs. Everyone was here including Mrs. Miller.

“You take forever,” Sarah said, smiling wide at Misty’s surprise and knowing exactly what she was thinking.

Misty looked at the brightly wrapped packages and the cake. It felt wonderful to be loved and cared for.

“I got you something too,” Simon told her, his eyes going to the door.

She followed his gaze to the open door behind her. A young woman with midnight black hair accented with pink, a nose ring, and a tattoo on her shoulder stared at her.

“Paige?” Misty whispered.

“The one and only. You didn’t think I would miss this birthday, did you? We can party together now and you never need to hide again.”

Misty ran and threw her arms around Paige .

“I can’t believe you’re here. I missed you so much.”

Paige leaned away. “I missed you too, but I know someone else you left behind, and my birthday present is fixing it.”

Misty had no idea what Paige was talking about until her friend called out a familiar name and a young boy walked in.

“Noah?” It couldn’t be. He ran at her, and she grabbed him and lifted him into her arms, swinging him around as she tried to understand how this had happened.

“How?” she asked when he released her, and she turned toward Paige.

“I began watching him after I left here. Your parents went on a mission and put him

in a school.” At the look on Misty’s face, she held up her hand. “It wasn’t as bad as the place we were at, but I managed to get him out for the day. He’ll need to go back.”

“No,” Misty said. “He can stay here.”

“We were teenagers and knew too much. The school and our parents didn’t try to find us as hard as they could have. We were tainted.”

“I want to go back,” Noah said. “I like my school and I promised Paige I would never tell anyone about the island. She said she would put spiders in my bed if I did.”

“Paige,” Misty ground out.

Her friend shrugged. “I had to think of something, and snakes seemed worse. I doubt he’ll say anything because he wants to come for visits, and I said I would help him.”

Misty turned to Simon. “They’re your presents?” she asked.

“Paige is my present, and Noah is hers. Roberto and Yolanda brought the cake. Sarah, Caitlyn, and Mrs. Miller brought presents so you have something to unwrap.”

She had a family. She would never be forced to marry some old man she didn’t know. Her brother let out a startled gasp when Indra walked through the open door and rubbed against Misty’s side.

She smiled and rested her hand on the large head. Now her family was complete.

The End