



What Billions Can't Buy

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Category: Horror

Description: Twelve billionaires. An island in the middle of nowhere. And a deadly game with no escape.

The invitation is nothing unusual. A week of being wined and dined at an exclusive Caribbean resort in exchange for attending a few meetings about investing in a promising startup? Why not?

From the moment weapons magnate Geri Cole steps off her private jet, though, something isn't right. It's possible she imagined that truck with the gun turret. And maybe those weren't really body bags out on the loading dock.

But she's not imagining the complete lack of cell service—not even the powerful signal booster her company created for military use can connect to anything.

Billionaire playboy heir Quinn Hayworth has a bad feeling about it, too. The vibe is strange, and no one knows a thing about the company that's supposed to be wooing them.

When their “host” finally shows his cards, Quinn and Geri's suspicions are correct—but their situation is much worse than they ever could have imagined.

Now they're two of twelve unwitting contestants trapped on a remote island, forced to play by the rules of a sadist. Subjected to cruel “challenges” and barbaric punishments, they're powerless to use their billions or their influence to escape. There's no way out except to win the game.

Because on this reality show, no loser goes home alive.

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“I don’t need to tell you, Ms. Cole,” Andrew Huffman said, glaring over his glasses, “that if this little investment flops, you can kiss your position as CEO goodbye.”

Geri returned the glare, wishing he’d go occupy one of the other empty seats on the Cole Industries private jet. “You don’t need to tell me, and yet here you are—telling me. Again.” She put her wineglass down and narrowed her eyes. “Do you have anything new to add to the conversation? Or do you just enjoy reminding me how eager you and the rest of the board are to boot me out?”

His expression softened to something more paternal—patronizing, really—and he pressed his elbow into the armrest as he inclined his head. “I just think this is risky. Even reckless.”

“Startup investments are always risky. The smart investor has to take big risks in order to see big payouts. You may recall I learned that from my father, no?” She kept her voice flat, but managed to keep most of the frost out of it. God forbid any of the men on the company’s board started thinking she was cold or bitchy. She also schooled her tone to keep it from sounding forceful; after all, one man’s assertiveness was another woman’s aggressive bossiness.

I chose this career over going to medical school, why?

Andrew released a long, condescending sigh. “There’s risk, and there’s risk . What’s wrong with waiting until you’ve been CEO for a while before you start gambling with this kind of—”

“I’m not gambling with Cole Industries money,” she told him for the four hundredth

time. “Which means it’s really none of the board’s business what I do.”

“But it shows irresponsibility,” he hissed. “No one wants a CEO who’s—”

“What? A compulsive gambler?” She gave a caustic laugh. “That didn’t bother any of you when my father was in my seat.”

Andrew’s lips formed a tight, bleached line. Like most of the people she dealt with at her late father’s company, he didn’t like her, and he hated any reminder that her father hadn’t been a saint worthy of the pedestal they placed him on.

“Let’s revisit this conversation in two years,” she suggested coldly. “When RightPriceTek stock is worth a hundred times what it is today, and you and the rest of the board wonder aloud if I was too cautious and not willing to take risks by investing even more.” She leaned forward and clasped her hands around her knee, which was primly crossed over the other. “At what point do you all have some faith that I know what I’m doing? Or even that my father knew what he was doing?”

Andrew scowled, but he didn’t push. There would probably be a terse email to the rest of the board, along with some hushed phone calls. Geri was exhausted just thinking about the scrutiny she’d be under for the next week. She’d almost gotten used to the always being under a microscope; that came with the territory of being the relatively young female CEO of a major defense contractor. It was only going to intensify now that she dared to take a week away from the boardroom for an investment that wouldn’t directly benefit Cole Industries.

As if she ever took time off, and as if her father’d had half the business savvy she had in her little finger. These assholes were all just bitter because the company was flourishing under her leadership. Since she’d taken the helm, the company had locked down two major new contracts with the Department of Defense, and stock was at a record high.

She and Andrew both knew the board wouldn't oust her. The shareholders would revolt.

She broke the staring contest with Andrew and shifted her glare to the turquoise Caribbean waters far below. Whether the board of directors ever had faith in her or not, she doubted this little venture would make or break anything. She wasn't even committing to investing money; this was simply a weeklong retreat in which the founders of RightPriceTek would attempt to woo her and other potential investors into pouring money into their company. The fact that they had enough capital already to put on such a retreat on a private island could either be a good sign or a bad one. They might be burning every penny and line of credit they had in an ill-judged attempt to dazzle investors. Or they might have plans as big as their initial sales pitch had implied, and they were serious enough to put in this kind of effort to wine and dine those with even more money.

It was worth a week to hear their full pitch, she'd decided, and apparently the board had taken that to mean she was already writing an eight-figure check straight from one of Cole Industries' accounts.

Geri drained her wineglass and stared harder at the sea below. She didn't want to admit how badly she needed this week to be the gold mine RightPriceTek had promised it would be. The board's lack of faith had begun to erode her confidence even as the numbers had shown she was doing exceedingly well. A huge return on investment would look fabulous to the otherwise skeptical board and to her persistent imposter syndrome. If she could invest so wisely that she made back enormous returns, then maybe the good ol' boys would have more faith in her abilities.

Would it be enough for them to reconsider trying to oust her? Hard to say. Running a multibillion dollar corporation that provided military gear to the United States and a number of its allies required a certain level of ruthlessness. No one on the board of directors believed Geri possessed that ruthlessness. They were sure she was too much

like her shrinking violet mother and disinterested younger sister, rather than her table-pounding, bellowing father who had built Cole Industries from nothing. No one had intimidated her father. Not generals. Not sitting presidents. No one.

He'd raised Geri to be the same, and after he'd died two years ago, she'd stepped into his penthouse office and taken the reins just as he'd groomed her to do since she was a child and just as he'd ordered her to do in his will. The board had known she would assume that role upon his death, but they'd apparently taken for granted that Linus Cole would be at the helm for another ten or twenty years. They'd all likely be long retired and her ascension would be someone else's problem.

One hellish ICU stay and a funeral later... well, here they were. No one was happy about it, and they were never going to let her forget it.

Sighing, Geri rubbed the bridge of her nose. She'd have been lying if she'd said the whole island getaway thing hadn't been part of this trip's appeal. It was business of course, but there were promises of plenty of time on white sand beaches with fishbowl margaritas, and she had every intention of indulging. She needed a break .

As long as a hurricane didn't show up. She'd never been as sick or scared as she'd been when a hurricane had taken an unexpected turn and hit the cruise ship she'd been on with her parents. Since then, whenever she ventured into areas prone to such storms, she obsessively checked weather forecasts. Going into political hot zones and warzones didn't bother her nearly as much as even considering stepping into a hurricane's path.

She was especially jumpy about violent tropical weather after a day cruise—part of another startup company's no-expenses-spared attempt to woo investors—had ended in disaster several months ago. Eleven highly influential moguls across various industries were presumed dead after the superyacht upon which they'd been schmoozing had been lost in a freak storm off the coast of St. Martin. One

attendee—a friend of her father’s from their days at Yale—had attended the retreat but missed the boat due to illness. He hadn’t been able to speak about it when he’d come home, despite the press hounding him relentlessly for commentary on the tragic loss of several friends and colleagues. Geri wondered if that was why he’d eaten a bullet less than two weeks after he’d returned.

Needless to say, Geri was nervous. She tried to tell herself the forecasts were still clear, and the odds of another deadly disaster befalling a startup’s investor party were astronomical. That did little to quell the irrational queasiness in the pit of her stomach, though.

At least for now, despite a busy hurricane season that was well underway, there wasn’t a lot of activity coming this direction. With any luck, that would hold out for the next week, but she planned to check constantly throughout the trip. One sign of so much as a tropical depression or anything that might not bode well for this retreat and, lucrative investments be damned, she’d have everyone from Cole Industries off the island in a heartbeat.

No storms this week. I need this to work out. Please, no storms this week.

The pilot announced they’d be landing soon, and Geri made sure her seat belt was still fastened. The cabin crew cleared away everyone’s drinks, and before long, her ears began to pop as the plane descended. Moments later, the wheels touched down.

At the end of the runway, Geri and her entourage filed off the jet and out into the thick humidity. A gentle breeze helped, but she was still hit with a blast of damp heat; no matter how much she traveled to tropical places, it was always a shock to the senses, especially for someone accustomed to the more temperate weather in northwestern Oregon.

Fortunately, an air-conditioned stretched Land Rover waited for Geri, Andrew, and

Geri's assistant, Beth. They were joined by two white men in matching blue RightPriceTek golf shirts.

The men settled onto the bench seat facing Geri, Andrew, and Beth, and the first said, "Welcome to Faraway Resort. I apologize that Mr. Price wasn't able to come down and meet you personally, but he's putting all the finishing touches on this week's event." He extended his hand. "I'm Kevin Riley, and this is Tyson Kent."

Geri shook his hand. "Geri Cole, Cole Industries. This is Andrew Huffman and my assistant, Beth Vincent."

Everyone shook hands and finished introductions as the Land Rover pulled off the tarmac and onto a dirt road leading away from the tiny airstrip. Tyson stayed quiet, but Kevin didn't.

"I assure you, RightPriceTek has spared no expense to make sure everyone is comfortable and having a good time." His smile seemed like it should have reminded Geri of an overzealous salesman, but it didn't quite hit that note. She couldn't put her finger on what note it did hit, but she decided then and there that she wasn't comfortable with Kevin. He went on, "Whatever amenities you need, the resort has, and if they don't have something, it can be flown in as long as it doesn't involve snow. We've got kayaking, snorkeling, scuba diving, and there are some islands nearby with some excellent hiking."

"No hiking on this island?" Andrew sounded smug, as if he'd just found a hair in his soup and intended to sue the place into oblivion. "So much for having every amenity."

Kevin chuckled. "Well, there is hiking here, but it's a small and fairly flat island without much in the way of interesting topography. Some of the others nearby—which we can take you to via boat or helicopter—have much more

satisfying trails and fewer snakes.” He smiled again, this time meeting Andrew’s smugness with his own, and Andrew scowled.

Normally, that would have amused Geri. Few things entertained her like watching uptight assholes being taken down a peg.

But Kevin unnerved her more than Andrew’s scowl amused her.

Kevin went on, explaining in a wink-wink nudge-nudge tone that he was serious when he said that anything a person wanted could be flown in from somewhere else. Geri didn’t have to ask for clarification. When she’d started accompanying her father to high society events—especially those in international waters or on islands whose laws were suggestions at best—she’d learned that people in their circles were unconcerned with what was considered acceptable by the population at large. She’d seen a prudishly conservative federal judge with his hand down a waiter’s pants, and she’d once snorted coke with two vocally anti-drug senators. Nothing surprised her anymore.

A fishbowl margarita, a joint, and some time to herself on a beach would be enough for her, but she had no doubt the RightPriceTek people would be transporting in all kinds of “amenities” to keep the other potential investors entertained.

Geri kept her expression placid and looked out the window at the passing scenery. The road was lined with palm trees and what she thought were small patches of sugarcane up against a dense jungle. Just up ahead, a gleaming white and tinted glass building loomed high in the sky. It was triangular—vertical on one side and sloping dramatically on the other—with balconies extending from the higher rooms. At the top was a structure that reminded her of the rotating rooftop restaurants she’d seen in various cities—disc-shaped and surrounded by near-black windows. The place was impressive, and—

Just beyond the dense tree line, another vehicle went by, speeding in the opposite direction. She only caught a glimpse, but the boxy profile of a drab green Humvee was difficult to mistake for something else. As was the shape of a man sitting on top behind a very large black weapon.

She turned to Kevin. “Is there a military base on this island?”

Tyson shifted almost imperceptibly, but Kevin didn’t miss a beat. “No, just the resort.” He gestured in the direction she’d seen the Humvee. “There is a small fleet of military surplus vehicles, though. They’re better suited than civilian vehicles for some of the rougher terrain, and they have the cargo space we need for supplies coming in via the air strip and the marina.” He grinned. “In fact I believe there are a few manufactured by your company.”

Geri fought to keep her expression neutral. “I see.” But what about the gun turret on top of the Humvee? That wouldn’t be necessary for moving cargo in and out of a resort on an otherwise unoccupied island. She had only caught a glimpse, though. And the last few dozen times she’d seen a vehicle like that one, they’d had fifty-cals mounted on turrets. Maybe her brain just superimposed what she’d seen before. Maybe she hadn’t seen the gun or gunner at all.

“So,” Kevin said. “What do you think so far?” He gestured out the window. “Is this a gorgeous island or what?”

“It is.” She held his gaze. “It must cost a fortune to rent this entire resort. Especially for a startup looking for capital.”

That smug smile stayed firmly in place, and she was genuinely surprised he didn’t reach across and give her thigh a creepy squeeze. “Oh, we’re not renting the island. RightPriceTek owns the island.”

Geri blinked. “And yet the company still needs capital for its startup.”

“Well.” He laughed. “Mr. Price has much bigger dreams than just running a resort. That’s where you come in.”

“I see.”

Tyson finally spoke, his voice flat. “Mr. Price will explain everything during the investors’ meeting tomorrow.” He smiled like someone who’d been told to smile but wasn’t sure how. “In the meantime, you and the other guests can enjoy yourselves around the resort.”

“Thank you,” Geri said because she had no idea what else to say.

Kevin continued regaling them with everything the resort had on offer, but Geri mostly tuned him out. She’d read the emails when she’d signed up. All she cared about now was checking into her suite, indulging in a cigarette and a long shower, and then hunting down a beach chair and that fishbowl margarita. Asking for a joint could probably wait until she was in for the evening. The last thing she needed was Andrew scurrying back to the board and tattling to them that she was smoking weed now too.

Thinking about that made her want a joint even more.

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Quinn Hayworth stepped off the RightPriceTek superyacht and gave the tall, triangular hotel the kind of appreciative down-up gaze he usually reserved for a particularly hot woman. He'd stayed in some damn gorgeous hotels on some damn gorgeous islands, but the Faraway Resort was blowing them all out of the crystal clear water.

Awesome. He wasn't sold on whether RightPriceTek was worth the investment, but at least this retreat promised to be fun. He'd sit through whatever pitch they had and write whatever check they wanted as long as he could spend a week getting laid, getting drunk, and getting high. He was planning to do more of that in Jamaica before heading off to meet friends in Ibiza, though those stops didn't require him to listen to sales pitches.

Eh, whatever. It was a few meetings, an investment, and hopefully the thrill of a fat return. If not, well, it wasn't like he was out much money, and he still had the week of sex and drinking to look forward to, plus the rest of his trip. Could be worse.

He strolled down the marina, which was crowded with people. Staff wrangled luggage through throngs of new arrivals and their entourages. Quinn never quite understood why people needed that much stuff or staff for a weeklong vacation. His own mother had always packed like she was going away for a year or two, and even when it was just a weekend somewhere, she never went anywhere without a whole entourage of employees. That was way too much hassle as far as he was concerned.

Almost everyone coming to the resort right now seemed to be traveling with the same philosophy as his mother, though; they were all followed by parades of security, advisors, assistants, and God knew what else. Quinn hated that shit. He sometimes

took a bodyguard with him if he went to a casino. Even that was only because he liked to look the part of the high roller, and the expensive suits, flashy jewelry, and high performance sports car could make him a target for robbery. So, fine, he'd bring along some muscle. Plus the bodyguard added to the whole aesthetic of someone worth robbing, so he could live with it.

The rest of the time, though? Fuck that. He didn't like someone following him around, and he couldn't think of anything he'd need an actual person trotting alongside him to do. Schedule? There was an app for that. Security? Overkill unless someone was actually threatening him. Making travel arrangements and shit like that? Not exactly time-consuming, and besides, he liked the challenge of finagling good deals on airfare even when he could afford to buy the whole damn airline.

He'd traveled light as always, and his pair of medium-sized suitcases were safely in the hands of some resort employees. He had his laptop case slung over his shoulder as he continued past the crowd toward the grand courtyard of the towering hotel. There, a sign pointed him toward the restaurant and bar, and why yes, a drink did sound good.

On his way, he looked around at the other people arriving. There were some familiar faces, which he'd expected. It was no secret that RightPriceTek was wooing some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world to fund their newest venture, so he'd fully expected to see some of the billionaires who'd rubbed elbows with his parents when they were still alive.

Seeing their faces now was no surprise, but it did make Quinn suppress an irritated groan. Some of these assholes were insufferable. Alan Robinson and Dan Woolman, men who'd made their fortunes in the coal and petroleum industries, respectively, were pompous windbags who even Quinn's father had only been able to handle in small doses. That said a lot .

“My assistant has detailed instructions for you,” a familiar female voice snapped at someone. “Make sure everything is arranged in my suite precisely the way I’ve asked.”

Quinn turned toward the voice, and he did a double take as a tall, elegant woman in a wide straw hat strode down the marina in high heels. Holy shit—Elena Simmons was here? But... hadn’t he heard someone saying Charlie Simmons was flying in tonight? They’d both be here?

Whoa. Either they’d miraculously reconciled after the messiest and most expensive divorce of the century, or things were going to get awkward in a hurry.

“Cool.” Quinn chuckled to himself as he continued toward the bar. “I love fireworks.”

The restaurant was starting to fill up, but no one was sitting at the bar yet. Quinn put his laptop case on one barstool and sat in another, and in under a minute, he had a double whiskey on the rocks. The voyage had left him a little seasick, and the cold liquid soothed the lingering nausea. A ginger ale might have been better, but he’d already had about forty of those on the boat, and just thinking about the taste made him want to heave more than the gently rolling waves had. Whiskey it was. If this retreat involved constant schmoozing with some of the assholes who usually came to shit like this, he might have to start ordering by the bottle, but a double would do for now.

From the bar, he had a panoramic view of the courtyard in front of the lobby, as well as the marina. Between people disembarking yachts and the cars pulling in from—he thought he’d heard someone say—the airstrip elsewhere on the island, he could see everyone coming and going.

And Lord, considering this was only supposed to be a meeting for potential investors,

it was going to be a who's who event. Quinn would know; he'd been to more of those than he could count.

Art Keller, president and CEO of pharmaceutical giant Keller & Boggs, had just stepped out of a stretched Land Rover. Naturally, his phone was pressed to his ear while at least half a dozen people tried to talk to him all at once. He waved them away and barked something at whoever was on the phone.

Quinn rolled his eyes. He'd met Art at a couple of charity poker tournaments, and the guy was a pill-popping dickhole. Quinn didn't even know what the pills were, only that he always saw Art throwing them back and chasing them with highballs when he didn't think anyone was looking. Dude could drink too, and when he drank, he got loud .

Please tell me his suite is on another floor this time .

Art and his entourage went into the hotel, and moments later, another Land Rover pulled up. This time, two familiar faces emerged. Lynnette Baldwin was an heiress who'd become a political lobbyist. She was well-known for greasing the palms of politicians at the behest of numerous organizations in multiple industries. Quinn had met her several times when she'd been helping his father persuade Congress to vote against policies he didn't like.

The man walking with her now had inherited his dad's position on top of a megastore chain that was spreading from coast to coast faster than a flu outbreak. The family name was Valentine, that much Quinn knew, but hell if he could remember the guy's name.

Shortly after they'd cleared out, Paul O'Connor arrived with a handful of assistants and personal security. Quinn rolled his eyes. Paul was the kind of person who made Quinn understand why his mother had always sneered at "new money." The jackass

was an AI techbro whose generative AI software had exploded onto the market in the last couple of years. In a matter of months, he'd gone from broke college dropout to owning five— five —Koenigsegg cars, and he never missed an opportunity to let people know that a three million dollar car was nothing to him now.

Quinn had met him twice, and both encounters had left him wishing he could carve out the piece of his brain responsible for holding on to that memory. The man may have come from humble beginnings, but there was nothing humble about him now.

And he, like Charlie Simmons and Art Keller, was here this week. Great.

Quinn whistled and picked up his drink. RightPriceTek really had gone looking for the wealthiest of the wealthy in their search for investors. Which made sense, given their ambitious plans for the future. They'd been a little vague about how they intended to accomplish those plans—revolutionizing everything from commercial and industrial to medical processes to be more efficient and profitable, eliminating everything from pollution to poverty—but they'd insisted that more details would be revealed to those willing to consider substantial investments. By the end of this week, according to the invitation, they would all have enough information to decide whether or not an investment in RightPriceTek would be worthwhile.

And even if you decide not to invest, you'll still have a week to enjoy our resort's exclusive luxury amenities—on us!

Well, shit. Twist his arm.

Not that he'd have needed his arm twisted anyway. Quinn was on a losing streak that refused to break. One investment after another had played out in the worst possible ways, leaving him with nothing to show for massive amounts of money he'd poured into promising startups. At this point, he was sitting at the blackjack table with a shrinking stack of chips, betting high because it was the only way to win big, but

every hand was bust after bust after bust.

He was hardly hurting for money—what he'd inherited from his parents would last him until he was dead—but he didn't like losing. It fucked with his head and made him depressed, and it made him that much more determined to win. Lately, he'd been losing big and betting bigger, and sooner or later, something would hit. He needed a win. He needed to break this streak.

No pressure, RightPriceTek.

He took a deep swallow of whiskey and kept watching the people arriving at the resort, security detail and entourages in tow. He suspected a lot of these assholes had entourages for the same reason he took a bodyguard to the casino. Not the high-risk-for-robbery part—the aesthetic. Nothing made someone feel important like a flock of armed grunts on their heels.

Right then, a woman strode into the hotel lobby. It took a moment for her face to register, but when it did, he recognized Kit Mason of chemical and pesticide fame—along with, predictably, her army of employees. Seriously, how many people did one person need for a weeklong stay at a resort?

Bringing his glass up for another drink, he rolled his eyes.

“Quinn Hayworth?” A familiar Texas twang turned his head just as Kyle Aimes appeared beside him, hand extended and a smarmy non-smile on his face. “Why am I not surprised to see you here, gambling man?”

“You really think I'd miss an opportunity like this?” Quinn shook Kyle's hand. “It must be worth it if a stingy son of a bitch like you showed up.”

Kyle chuckled, and paused to flag down a bartender before turning to Quinn again.

“I’m not stingy, my friend. I’m cautious.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you know what they say.” Quinn raised his glass. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Right.” Kyle smirked. “The corollary is nothing ventured, nothing lost to stupid decisions and excessive optimism.”

“Stupid decisions?” Quinn put a hand to his chest. “That hurts, man. That really hurts.” He meant it as a joke, but it did kind of sting, given his ever-lengthening losing streak.

Kyle clapped his shoulder. “We’ll chalk it up to excessive optimism, then.”

Quinn just laughed. He’d known Kyle for years, though he wouldn’t exactly call them friends, and he maintained that Kyle was a coward when it came to investments. On the other hand, Kyle didn’t need to make investments, risky or otherwise. Thanks to an empire of oil wells across the Southwest, that fucker had been richer than God long before he’d ever been shot out of his daddy’s ball sac.

And to be fair, it wasn’t like Quinn had crawled up from rags to riches. His grandparents had gotten rich through real estate and property development, and his parents had continued the tradition. Quinn found that whole industry boring as hell unless he was the one buying. He preferred the excitement of making a bet and seeing it pay off.

Vegas, Reno, Monte Carlo—those were fun for an evening or two, but even they got boring before long. He could never find tables that let him play the stakes that got his blood pumping.

That was why most of his gambling these days involved startup investments.

Investing was a long game. Sometimes it was months or even years before he knew if it was win, lose, or push. But the payouts? The mix of fear and excitement while he waited to see how the chips were going to fall? That was the kind of thrill he lived for.

A startup like RightPriceTek was an opportunity his gambling heart couldn't resist. Big promises, enormous risk, and a potentially astronomical payout. And what could he say? They had style. Seven days on a tropical island in a luxury hotel, having his ass kissed by the company masterminds? Hell, he'd already made up his mind to invest— give me a win, damn it, give me a win—but if this was how they won people over, and it didn't turn into something annoying like a timeshare sales pitch, then he didn't mind playing a little hard to get.

He turned to Kyle, who had just acquired a draft beer. "So what do you think?" He nodded toward the hotel. "Of RightPriceTek?"

"Well." Kyle chuckled into his glass. "They sure ask nicely. Seems only polite to listen to the sales pitch."

Quinn laughed. "I mean, the company. You think you'll invest?"

"Don't know yet." Kyle sipped his beer and put the glass back down. "Sounds like an awful lot of pie in the sky to me."

"Yeah?"

"Well yeah. The way they talk, you'd think they were gonna singlehandedly save the world or trigger a second Industrial Revolution. Now while I certainly appreciate the enthusiasm, I'm gonna need to see more than hats and boots before I call these fellas cowboys."

“Hear, hear.” Quinn drained his glass and flagged down the bartender.

Kyle looked over his shoulder toward the beach. “Let’s just hope the weather holds out.”

“The—” Quinn eyed him. He waved a hand the clear blue sky, which didn’t have a single cloud anywhere in sight. “Have you looked out there lately?”

“It’s pretty now, but that can change in a hurry.” Kyle faced him, expression serious. “Didn’t you hear about that yacht that got caught up in a storm a while back? Came out of fucking nowhere—caught all them storm predictors completely by surprise. And that boat?” He shook his head. “They never even found the debris, never mind any bodies.”

Quinn sobered. “Of course I heard about it. We had a family friend onboard.”

Kyle stiffened. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Quinn acknowledged it with a nod and a quiet grunt. “Last I heard, the captain of the boat should’ve known there was a storm coming and gone the other way. Hurricanes and shit don’t just spin up out of nowhere.”

“Storms can, though. And they do.”

Quinn was skeptical. There had to have been some indication that a storm like that was going to develop. He wasn’t going to argue with Kyle, though, so he just said, “Well, good thing we’re not out on a boat, then. If there’s a storm, we’ll be safer here than on the water.”

Kyle shuddered. “I think I might skip all the excursions out on the water. They’re probably perfectly fine, but after what happened...”

Normally, Quinn would seize the opportunity to give Kyle hell for always erring on the side of caution. But he had to admit, he wasn't so thrilled about getting too far from shore right now. Even the boat ride here today from St. Martin had been unnerving. Bob Stevens's memorial service hadn't been all that long ago, and the thought of being out on a boat where he couldn't see land had made Quinn a little uneasy. In fact he was already seriously considering hitching a ride home on someone's private jet.

So maybe he'd stick to dry land too.

There were, after all, worse things in life than beaches, bars, and bikini-clad women.

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By the time she stepped into her suite, Geri's head was throbbing and she was ready to collapse. She didn't dare take a nap—her sleep schedule would get too jacked up, and she'd be a wreck for the rest of the week—but staying awake until this evening was going to take some effort.

At least she had some time to herself now. Hotel staff had taken Andrew and Beth to their suites down the hall, and after a great deal of insistence that she could unpack her own luggage, plus a generous tip, they'd left Geri alone. The staff had seemed puzzled by that—no doubt they were used to accommodating people of her social stature who expected menial tasks to be performed by someone else. God knew Geri's parents would have had half the hotel's payroll in here making sure clothing was arranged in dressers and closets, toiletries were laid out according to specific instructions, and the refrigerator and minibar were stocked just so.

Geri preferred to settle into hotel rooms by herself, and that preference had intensified after she'd ascended to her father's role as CEO. With her every word and motion being picked apart by a board searching for any reason to oust her, she was desperate for something private.

And, ironically given the power her title implied, she jealously guarded her privacy in hotel rooms as well as her bedroom at home because they were among the precious few areas in her life where she maintained control. In here, no one questioned her decisions, no one moved anything, and anyone who so much breathed an opinion could be booted without a second thought.

So, for a solid hour after she'd turned the deadbolt behind her small entourage, she made the suite into her temporary home. Putting her watch and phone on the

righthand nightstand so they'd be within reach. Arranging her toiletries on the counter and in the shower stall. Mentally inventorying everything to be sure she hadn't forgotten something. Hanging her pantsuits and dresses in the closet. Tucking all her more casual clothes into the deep drawers of the teak bureau and her suitcases into the back of the closet. Moving the colorful flower arrangement and Welcome to RightPriceTek's Investor Getaway card to the dresser so she could put her laptop and peripherals on the coffee table.

The place was oddly minimalist, all things considered. The furniture was all luxury hardwood, but the walls—apart from the giant flat screen TV—were bare. No overly expensive modern art piece in sight. No excruciatingly bland watercolor prints. No monotonous landscapes in pale pastels. Just stark, bare walls painted a faint blue-gray that was so light, it was only a shade or two removed from white.

It was... weirdly bleak and cold. Not at all the kind of warm, welcoming environment she'd come to expect in high end hotels. Maybe that was something to point out on the inevitable how was your visit? survey.

She could live with it though, and while the suite wasn't home, it was hers. Bleak, bare walls or not, this would be her oasis of calm and relaxation this week. When the meetings were over and she could bow out of the inevitable schmoozing, she could come up here, indulge in a cigarette or a little weed on the balcony, and lounge on the bed to watch a stupid movie on the giant flat screen. Who would've thought becoming CEO of a powerful organization would mean thrilling in these rare moments of no one telling her what to do or saying she couldn't just kick back with a damn movie?

Surveying the room, she took and released a deep breath. Yes. She was settled in. She could face the week as long as she had this place to escape to when she hit her saturation point.

She couldn't relax, though. In her mind's eye, she kept seeing that flash of a gun turret on top of a Humvee. Kevin had had an explanation for it, one that made sense, and she still couldn't be sure she'd actually seen the gun, but her stomach couldn't quite calm down. Especially since while she didn't know if she'd imagined the fifty cal, she hadn't imagined the uncomfortable shift in Tyson's posture. Though he hadn't breathed a word, she'd felt the spike in tension.

But that wasn't the only thing that didn't sit quite right.

When the car had arrived in front of the hotel, staff had descended on them and the vehicle carrying their luggage. Kevin had chattered incessantly at Geri, telling her more about all the fabulous amenities, but she'd tuned him out enough to take in her surroundings.

Geri had been to more Caribbean islands and resorts than she could count. They were as familiar to her as the private schools she'd attended and the homes her parents had in Switzerland and the Hamptons.

Faraway Resort checked most of the boxes she was accustomed to, but one thing jumped out at her along with the apparition-like glimpse of the Humvee—the resort staff was conspicuously homogenous. They were all white, and their accents were strikingly similar.

They were strikingly white and American.

All of them.

There wasn't even a lot of variation between their accents—nothing to place someone in the Deep South or New England or anywhere else. Nothing to hint at the Midwest or any other region. Just very non-descript American instead of the accents she expected to hear in the Caribbean.

Okay, so if there wasn't anything else on the island except for the resort, then there wouldn't be a local population to exploit for labor, but it was odd that everyone who'd been brought here to work was a white American.

She didn't know if that was a red flag, a green one, or nothing at all. If it was a reason to be concerned or just a thing. She just knew it was strange, and strange was disconcerting.

A knock at the door startled her so hard she gasped.

Then she rolled her eyes. She seriously needed to ask someone about that joint. Stat.

Geri turned the deadbolt and opened the door. Beth was there, now sporting a short-sleeved blouse and a pair of shorts. Her hair was damp, and she had a half-sleepy, half-satisfied gleam in her eyes that Geri recognized from a mile away.

"Are you serious?" Geri laughed as she waved her assistant into the room. "We've been here three hours, and you've already gotten laid?"

Beth grinned unrepentantly. "Did you see the guy pushing the luggage cart? You'd have done him too if you'd had the chance."

Geri turned the deadbolt again and huffed a laugh. "I don't get how you even have the energy."

"Because I didn't spend the entire flight trying to Force choke Andrew." Her assistant perched in one of the chairs by the balcony door. "I was tired just watching you and him staring each other down."

Geri groaned as she took the other chair. "You're telling me." She shook herself. "And by the way, you're sure you have enough of—"

“Geri.” Beth rolled her eyes. “I appreciate the concern, but for the billionth time, I promise—we’re here for a week, and I still have enough to last me two.”

Geri nodded. Her assistant was insulin dependent, and she’d once had her backpack stolen along with a week’s worth of her meds. She’d still had some in her toiletry kit, but it had taken longer than Geri liked for her to replace what had gone missing. So now, whenever they traveled, Geri fretted and worried about Beth running out.

But as always, Beth was on top of things and had herself covered.

“So what’s up?” Geri asked. “Or did you just come over here to gloat about nailing...?” She inclined her head.

“His name is Mark, and no, I didn’t just come over here to brag about the fact that he has a legit six-pack and—”

“Oh my God. Shut up.” Geri laughed again. Just this playful banter with her unapologetically promiscuous assistant brought some life back into her. Beth was excellent at her job, but secretly, half the reason Geri kept her around was for this.

Beth sobered a bit, and she shifted in the chair, lacing her fingers around her knee. “There was something a little weird about him, though.”

Geri straightened. “Weird, how?”

“Well...” Beth’s eyes lost focus, and she chewed her lip. Then she met Geri’s gaze again. “While we were, you know, taking a break between rounds, we were kind of chatting. He asked if I was looking forward to the boat trip tomorrow. You know, the one where the company is taking all the assistants and employees out while you guys have to go to that investor meeting?”

Geri nodded. RightPriceTek had been emphatic that everyone in an attendee's entourage could expect star treatment as well, and after tomorrow's breakfast, they were all going out on a day cruise. "Yeah?"

Beth fidgeted again. "I told him I wasn't going to go. Because, I mean..." She waved her hand.

"Right, of course." Anyone who knew Beth knew she was deathly afraid of the water, and going out on a day cruise would be pure hell.

"He got..." She quirked her lips as if she wasn't quite sure how to word it. "Like, he got really insistent that I should go. Not like he was mad or insulted that I wanted to bow out, but like... I don't know. It wasn't like he couldn't get his head around the idea that someone wouldn't want to go on something like that—it was like he thought I needed to go. Like I have to go. It was weird."

"And you still went a second round with him?" Geri asked dryly. "When he obviously doesn't care what you want?"

"But that's the thing—in bed, he's totally in tune and always asking what I like and... Anyway. Like I said, it wasn't forceful or mean. He was just really weird about that one specific thing."

"I assume you still didn't agree to go."

"Oh God, no." She shuddered and chafed her arms. "Not a chance."

"And you still had sex with him. Again."

"Well, yeah." A little smirk played at her lips. "Once his mouth was busy, he shut up about the day cruise and he was amazing." The smirk died. "But doesn't that seem

weird to you?”

Geri thumbed the hem of her blouse. Yeah, it did seem weird. And any other time, she'd have played it off as just another guy saying dumb things.

But the Humvee.

But the all-white all-American staff.

But the cold, blank walls that were just a little strange.

Her gaze drifted to the flowers and the Welcome to RightPriceTek's Investor Getaway card.

Yeah. Something was weird.

Or maybe she was just getting paranoid. Hyperaware of anything that could possibly indicate this retreat was a scam and she was wasting time and money. She needed this investment to be everything RightPriceTek promised it would be, so of course she was jumpy about it.

Get a grip, she ordered herself. Yes. That was exactly what she needed to do. Calm the hell down, get a grip, and pull herself together so she'd be ready to bring her A-game to the negotiating table once RightPriceTek finished its sales pitch.

Maybe now would be a good time for that movie.

And some weed.

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Item one on the retreat's jam-packed itinerary was a dinner and cocktail reception hosted by the CEO. Everyone—entourages and all—came down to the restaurant patio in tropical casual. Khaki shorts, Hawaiian shirts, colorful dresses for the ladies. Quinn was grateful that suits or tuxes weren't required for this. Outdoors, it was just too hot and humid.

For the indoor events, he was glad he'd brought more than just shorts. The hotel's air-conditioning was damn near arctic. He'd adjusted it in his suite so it wasn't quite so cold, but everywhere else? He almost had to bundle up to get down to the lobby, just to strip most of it off before going outside.

The evening was warm, but not as oppressively hot as earlier. With a nice breeze and a cold beer in his hand, Quinn was quite comfortable.

He mingled a little, saying hello to people he could stand, deftly avoiding those who'd make him want to rip off his own ears, and introducing himself to anyone he hadn't met before. There really was quite a mix here. People hailed from all over the United States and represented every industry from oil to pharmaceuticals to high tech. Some were hardcore right wing. Others were somewhat liberal. The only common threads he could see were that everyone was powerful and had a net worth of ten figures or better. Quinn was worth around four billion—probably closer to three these days thanks to his bad streak—and it was strange to realize that at tomorrow's meeting, he would quite possibly be the poorest man in the room.

His gaze landed on Elena Simmons, who was having a very flirty conversation with petroleum magnate Dan Woolman. They seemed to have tuned out everyone around them just as they seemed oblivious to the gold ring on his left hand, not to mention

her ex-husband scowling nearby. Or maybe they weren't oblivious; Quinn had run in these circles long enough to know monogamy only existed on paper and adultery was a hobby.

He supposed everyone had to get their kicks somehow. Cheating had never been his MO, but it seemed to keep people from getting bored in between running empires, scaling literal mountains, and jet-setting all over the world. To each their own.

"Hey, Quinn?" Kyle materialized beside him again, glaring at his smartphone. "Ain't they supposed to have Wi-Fi here?"

Quinn took out his phone. "Why? Isn't it working?"

"There was a network for a little while, but then it started getting slow." Kyle huffed. "Now it won't even connect."

Quinn opened his connection settings. He'd been on the Wi-Fi earlier too without issue, but sure enough, there was nothing. No networks were even listed.

"Can you two connect?" Kit Mason joined them, holding up her phone and giving it a disgusted look. "I haven't been able to find a network in over an hour neither have any of my assistants."

"Nope. I've got nothing." Quinn shook his head as he pocketed his phone. "Must be down."

Kit made a face. "I'm going to talk to management. This is unacceptable."

With that, she stalked off. Quinn watched her go, then rolled his eyes and sipped his drink. So the internet was down? Chill the fuck out, lady.

Though if they ran out of booze or something, Quinn would be the one having words with management. Except it was a little unnerving, being disconnected from the mainland when they were this far out at sea. Irrational, maybe, since they were on an island and not a boat, but he didn't like the feeling of being unable to reach anyone beyond the island's shores.

How did people do vacations before cell phones and internet?

Someone tapped a spoon against a glass, and conversation died away. Heads turned toward a freckle-faced white man standing beside the bar with a microphone.

"Good evening, everyone!" He smiled brightly. "I just wanted to take a moment to introduce myself and welcome you to our lovely Faraway Resort. Some of you have already met me, but for those who haven't, I'm Kevin Riley, and I'd like to thank you all for coming to the RightPriceTek investors' retreat." He grimaced. "Unfortunately, our CEO had some last minute business to address, and won't be able to make tonight's reception. However"—he held up a finger—"he assures me he will be there for tomorrow's first investor meeting. And we'd also like to apologize that, as I'm sure you've all discovered, we're having some problems with internet connectivity. We're doing everything we can to restore it, but the problem seems to be with the satellites, not anything here on the island." He laughed. "And it wouldn't be an issue at all if RightPriceTek were in the satellite industry, but unfortunately that is out of our wheelhouse." He showed his palms. "We can't be everywhere, I guess."

Despite the collective annoyance at being unable to connect, a ripple of laughter went through the group.

"In the meantime," Kevin continued, "please, enjoy tonight's complimentary meal and drinks, as well as the rest of the hotel's incredible amenities. If there is anything you need, please don't hesitate to speak with our 24/7 concierge, and if you haven't been down to the spa, I highly recommend it, especially if you like Shiatsu massage."

Well now that piqued Quinn's interest. If he was going to spend the next week relaxing, it wouldn't hurt to kick it off with a nice deep tissue massage. Okay, it would hurt at the time if she knew what she was doing, but he'd walk out feeling like a billion bucks. Sold.

The lack of internet annoyed him. On the other hand, though, maybe it was a good thing. He was sort of on vacation, after all. Those beaches, bars, and bikini-clad women would be a lot more fun if he wasn't on his phone.

Especially if he could get a massage or three.

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Geri sipped her wine and feigned interest in Alan Robinson's endless monologue of... about... hell, she'd forgotten what he was talking about, and she was pretty sure he had too. This must have been the fiftieth tangent he'd gone down since he'd first opened his mouth, and whatever he was yammering on about now had little if anything to do with the speech he'd launched into after she'd mentioned the recent Department of Defense contract that her company had secured. Clearly he—a man whose world revolved around coal mining—knew more about weapons systems development and DoD needs than a woman who'd been Vice President of R&D for eleven years before ascending to the helm of the third largest weapons and defense manufacturer in the world.

If he keeps going on like this, I swear to Christ I'm calling in a drone strike on him .

Of course she couldn't do that, but it was amusing enough to keep her from scowling at him as hard as she wanted to. Like any woman in an industry like hers, she was used to being mansplained, and she was well-practiced at keeping a placid expression until he was satisfied he'd heard himself talk enough. And on the bright side, this was less painful than listening to everyone whispering behind their hands about Charlie and Elena Simmons and how long it would be before they had one of their infamous rip-roaring fights.

But her ridiculous thought about calling in a hypothetical drone strike reminded Geri she couldn't call in anything because last she'd checked, her phone wasn't working. Kevin had assured everyone it was being addressed, but she didn't like it. Not on its own, and not after the other incongruities she'd been noticing since she'd arrived. Everything weird made that fleeting glimpse of a Humvee clearer in her mind. The homogenous staff on the island. Mark's earnest insistence that Beth come along on

tomorrow's day cruise. Now no one could communicate off-island?

She reminded herself hotel Wi-Fi issues were not unusual, and the explanation about satellites was probably bullshit. They just didn't want to admit to their powerful guests that a router somewhere was malfunctioning.

Maybe if she got away from the building, she could catch some signal. And it would get her away from Alan's mansplaining and everyone else's Simmons gossip. Worth a try.

She drained her wineglass, set it on a table, and plastered on her best fake smile. "Listen, it's been lovely, but I think I'm going to turn in early. It was a long flight and I'm a little jetlagged."

"Of course." Alan smiled and extended his hand. "We'll see you tomorrow at the investors' meeting." As they shook hands, he added, "And if you need someone to break down how investments like this work, feel free to pull me aside."

Oh, you are so lucky I can't actually call in that drone strike.

Geri held the smile as she shook hands with everyone else, and then she bowed out and indulged in an exasperated sigh as she made a beeline for the door.

Up in her suite, she dug around in her bag for a high-powered signal booster. Her company manufactured them to help troops connect to satellites from the most remote corners of the middle of nowhere. If this thing couldn't pick up some kind of signal out here with St. Martin and the Virgin Islands well within range of a short flight, then the Bermuda Triangle was real and this island was in it.

She went back downstairs and out through the lobby's side entrance to a deserted patio. There, she attached the signal booster to her phone and switched it on. The

LED on the booster blinked yellow a few times, indicating it was searching for a signal.

Then it turned red.

“What the hell?” This thing worked in warzones with no communications infrastructure for hundreds, if not thousands of miles. Even if the satellite the hotel used for its Wi-Fi was out, the booster should have been able to sync up with any of the other myriad satellites passing overhead at a given moment.

Geri glared at the hotel. Some hotels had signal jammers in order to force patrons to use their Wi-Fi. Illegal, too, at least in the U.S., but she knew for a fact it was a thing. It didn't seem like something a hotel this isolated would need to use. Though it was possible they had it to keep guests from setting up their own networks and tricking other guests into logging in and giving up passwords.

Or it's just one more weird thing...

No. Get a grip.

Okay. Maybe she just needed to put some more distance between her and the building. Jammers were usually pretty localized. At the very least, its jamming capability would decrease with distance.

She followed the patio to a stairway, which led down to a palm- and banana-tree-lined path winding around toward the back of the hotel. When she was fifty yards or so from the building, she rebooted her phone and the booster, and tried again.

While the booster searched for a signal, she scanned her surroundings. Just beyond the row of trees was a tall fence, and through the slats she could see what appeared to be a loading dock lit by a single stark floodlight and the headlamps of a military

transport truck. There were voices and activity, which she assumed were employees taking out trash or something. It was hard to tell for sure, but the truck and its canopy appeared to be the same drab green as the Humvee. Another military surplus vehicle. No fifty cal on the roof, though.

The booster beeped.

Geri looked down and—

“Seriously?” She wanted to smash the damn thing under her foot until that stupid red light went out for good. Fine. She’d go farther down the—

On the loading dock, something landed with a heavy thud, and she turned toward the sound.

Two people appeared, silhouetted by the floodlight but wearing some sort of protective gear. Biohazard suits? What the hell?

They stood a few feet apart, leaned down, and picked something up. It was long and apparently heavy, sagging in the middle.

Acid lurched into Geri’s throat. That... that was a body bag . The way the weight was distributed, the people carrying it while wearing biohazard suits, the obvious heft as they heaved it unceremoniously into the back of the truck—there was no way in hell that was just garbage. That was definitely a body bag.

She tore her gaze away and held her breath, mind reeling and stomach contents threatening to make a violent reappearance. What the fuck was going on? Why in the hell were there people in biohazard suits tossing bagged bodies into a military truck behind this hotel, and—

“Ma’am?” A terse male voice startled her, and she turned to see Tyson, one of the men who’d ridden in with her from the airstrip. He wasn’t so quiet this time, though. “What are you doing? You’re not supposed to be out here.”

“I, um...” The bagged body flashed through her mind. Then she held up her phone. “I was just trying to get a signal so I could—”

“You need to go back to the hotel,” he snapped and pointed the way she’d come. “There are venomous snakes out here.”

“Snakes.” She scanned the ground at her feet. Of course the sun had gone down, so she couldn’t see a thing now except what was illuminated by the tiny slivers of light coming from the loading dock. The loading dock with biohazard suits and body bags and—

Was that a roving sentry with a rifle slung over his shoulder?

“Come on.” Tyson started toward her. “Let’s get you back to the hotel where it’s safe.”

“Uh...” She stammered and looked around. Her gaze went to the loading dock, but there was nothing there now. Just the truck, the light, and some voices and activity that she couldn’t see. The sentry was out of sight, rifle and all. Had she imagined him? And the body?

“Let’s go,” Tyson growled.

Geri didn’t hesitate. She hurried back up the path with Tyson on her heels. As soon as they were on the patio where she’d tried to find a signal earlier, he summoned some hotel staff to put up a sign advising guests not to go down that way. Five minutes later, as Geri was shakily smoking a cigarette, a young man appeared and placed a

sign right in the middle of the top step.

Hotel Staff Only – No Admittance.

Below that, a second sign:

Caution – Snakes.

While Geri smoked, Tyson hung around. He spoke in hushed tones with someone, eyeing her with a sour expression as the other man nodded along. Then the man vanished inside while Tyson continued to loom as Geri finished her cigarette.

Minutes later, the extra cheerful Kevin appeared, still dressed in the suit and tie he'd had on when he'd spoken to everyone at the dinner earlier. "What seems to be the problem?"

"I caught her"—Tyson jabbed a finger at Geri—"nosing around down there."

She expected Kevin's bright and shiny smile to vanish, and for him to berate her for being somewhere she didn't belong. Instead, he gave them each an amused look, as if they were children who'd been fighting over something stupid. "Tyson. Honestly. There's no reason to be rude to a guest who doesn't know her way around yet." He motioned toward the signs. "Were these up when she went down there?"

"No," the surly asshole replied. "I just had them put up."

"Well. Then we can't expect her to obey signs that aren't posted."

Tyson rolled his eyes, muttered something, and stalked back into the hotel. Kevin watched him go. Once they were alone, he faced Geri again. "I'm terribly sorry about him. He's ex-military, so he's very by-the-book. All rules and regulations."

Geri laughed uncomfortably. “Right. Got it.”

He studied her. “Is something wrong?”

“Um...” She swallowed, and then gestured toward the path with her cigarette. “I saw some men down there. In biohazard suits. Moving... stuff.” And a sentry. A sentry with a gun. Bringing the cigarette back to her lips, she asked, “What’s that about?”

“Oh. That.” Kevin laughed and gestured dismissively. “There are some old buildings on the island that are being dismantled, and as I’m sure you know, asbestos disposal has to be done according to strict standards.” He chuckled. “Well, not out here, of course, but we’re adhering to American standards and making sure it’s all done safely and correctly.”

Asbestos disposal. Right.

“Oh.” She took a drag off her cigarette and turned her head to blow out the smoke. “And they do it at night?” With armed guards?

“We have crews working around the clock. The sooner it’s all removed and disposed of, the better.” Kevin smiled that car salesman smile and touched her arm. “Relax. We’ve taken every precaution to make sure the contamination is contained, and it won’t affect any of our guests. Now why don’t we head back to the party?”

“In a minute.” She held up her mostly finished cigarette. “Just going to...”

“Right. Right.” He took a step toward the door. “Well, I’ll either see you back at the party, or at the investors’ meeting first thing in the morning.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said without a lot of enthusiasm.

Kevin left the patio, and Geri crushed her cigarette under her heel. She eyed the signs, and rolled Kevin's explanations around in her head along with what she'd seen. It was... okay, it was possible he was telling the truth. In fact, she'd never been involved in asbestos removal, and she had no idea if it would be hand-carried to a truck using bags and equipment like that. It made sense. Sort of.

But damn, every time she saw that image in her mind... It looked like a body in a bag. And then Tyson getting agitated about her being there? He hadn't seemed worried for her safety. He'd seemed legitimately pissed off that she was where she didn't belong.

Something wasn't adding up. First things first, she needed to research how asbestos was removed, and see if Kevin's story lined up.

And she would do that.

As soon as she had a goddamned internet connection.

She glared at the phone and booster, which sat uselessly on the concrete railing beside her cigarettes and lighter. Maybe she needed to try going down to the beach. That would be far enough away from the building that if there was a signal to be found, she'd find it, and if she stayed near all the areas she'd seen people relaxing in the sand and surf earlier, then no one could bitch at her for being in a restricted area. Or a "dangerous" one.

Venomous snakes, my ass.

Geri collected her cigarettes, phone, and booster, and she followed another path down toward the beach. By the time she'd reached the sand, she was a good hundred yards or more from the building. There had to be some signal down here.

She turned on the booster again, and waited.

“Good luck.” A man’s voice made her jump. She turned and found an attractive white man in a red Hawaiian shirt. He was blond with dark eyes and probably in his mid-thirties or so, making him about a decade younger than her. The lights from the hotel made the diamonds on his Rolex sparkle as he held up his phone. “I’ve been up and down this beach and can’t find a signal.”

“Well.” She gestured with the booster. “I might be able to find something with this.”

“Yeah?” He came closer. “What is it?”

“Signal booster. The kind we send into warzones with troops.”

He whistled. “Shit. I’m guessing they don’t sell that on Amazon?”

Geri laughed. “They’d better not.” The LED blinked yellow. Then, as it had on the patio and by the loading dock, it turned red. “Son of a bitch.” She switched it off. “I don’t know what’s going on when this thing can’t pick up a single satellite signal.”

The man eyed her. “They said a satellite was fucked up. What are the odds that it’s multiple satellites?”

“No idea. All I know is...” She held up the booster. “This isn’t helping.”

“Damn.”

She sighed, hoping he couldn’t see how unnerved she was by what she’d seen and by her booster’s inability to connect, and she took out her cigarettes again.

He straightened a little. “Any chance I could swipe one from you?”

Geri shrugged and offered him one. They both lit up, and after they'd each taken a drag, she said, "By the way, I'm Geri Cole."

"Quinn Hayworth." He extended his free hand. "You're with one of the military outfitters, aren't you?"

As she shook his hand, she inclined her head. "That depends. Are you going to explain all your superior knowledge of weapons and defense strategy?"

Quinn barked a laugh. "Yeah, my superior knowledge of anything war-related starts and ends with whatever I've picked up from Call of Duty , and I suck at Call of Duty ."

Geri laughed. "In that case, yes, I'm the CEO of Cole Industries. How did you guess?"

"Your signal booster toy kind of gave it away."

"Fair enough." She took a drag. "What about you?"

"My family did real estate and commercial property development. That's boring as hell for me, so I sold the companies and mostly invest in, well..." He gestured at the hotel with his cigarette. "Startups."

Geri's stomach tightened as she glanced up at the building. Everything she'd seen on the loading dock flickered through her mind. "But you've... I mean, I assume you're familiar with your family's business, right?"

Quinn shrugged. "Of course. I worked for my parents' companies for a while before I went off to do my own thing. Why?"

Eyes unfocused, she asked, “How much do you know about asbestos removal?”

“Asbestos removal? Um. Well. It’s a hazardous material, so it’s expensive and tedious as hell to remove.”

“Would you expect someone to be wearing protective gear while they worked on that kind of removal?”

Quinn tilted his head. “I... Well, yeah. Why?”

“Humor me. And while you’re at it, would there be any reason to have armed security for the process?”

His eyes widened. “Ugh. Protective gear, yes. Armed security?” He shook his head slowly. “Not unless they were doing the removal at some highly secure site. Why?”

She glanced warily at the hotel as she inhaled deeply from her cigarette. She blew out the smoke, then turned to him again. “Because I saw something weird.” She motioned toward the building. “Behind the hotel.”

“Weird? How so?”

“Workers in what I swear were biohazard suits. Kevin—that smarmy guy—he said they were in the process of removing asbestos from some old buildings behind the hotel, but...”

Had she seen a body bag? Was it suspicious? Or had she just never seen someone using proper precautions and disposing of that particular hazardous material? Now that she was trying to explain it out loud to someone, she wondered if she’d just seen something perfectly mundane, but because it was unfamiliar, she’d superimposed something she had seen before. Given how many cop shows she watched...

“Geri?” Quinn asked. “What did you see?”

She dropped her gaze. “It’s going to sound crazy. Maybe it is.” She hesitated before meeting his eyes. “But I swear, I thought they were carrying out a body bag.”

His eyebrows rose. “A body bag?” he whispered. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “I can’t be sure. It might’ve been exactly what he said it was. I mean, it was dark, and I only caught a glimpse. Ditto with what I thought was a roving sentry carrying a rifle. I swear I saw him, but maybe I didn’t, and—”

“And things already feel weird because we have absolutely no way of communicating off-island.”

She held his gaze. “You wondered about that too?”

“I didn’t before, but I do now.” Quinn brought the cigarette up to his mouth. “Especially since I tried to use my room’s landline to call in and check on some stocks.”

A chill ran down Geri’s spine. “You couldn’t connect?”

“I couldn’t even get a dial tone.”

“Are you serious?”

Quinn nodded grimly. “I was able to call down to the concierge, no problem. But the minute I dialed nine to get an outside line? Nothing.”

“Holy shit.” The lingering heat of the tropical day did nothing to temper the cold settling beneath her skin. “What the hell is going on?”

Swallowing, he shook his head. “I have no idea. But something tells me tomorrow is going to be interesting.”

She had a feeling he was right.

Geri slept like shit that night.

She was pretty sure she was overreacting, but that wasn't enough to calm her down and let her sleep. A Xanax around midnight helped. A massage at around 2:30 did too. A shot of something sour and strong from the minibar—she hadn't even bothered reading the label—finished her off. It wasn't the best sleep she'd ever had, especially since she had to be out the door at nine, but it was better than staring at the ceiling all night.

When morning came, everyone—potential investors and their giant entourages—crowded into the restaurant for a gourmet breakfast buffet.

Beth, unsurprisingly, came downstairs with Mark on her heels. They shared some playful grins, and though they didn't kiss or touch, there was some definite promise in the lingering looks they exchanged. Under normal circumstances, Geri would've laughed—trust Beth to find an attractive man on the first day and spend the better part of the week in bed with him. But after the comments Beth had made yesterday, Geri wasn't sure about the guy. Beth could take care of herself. She was no man's doormat. But had she really spent last night with a man who was pushing her to go on a day cruise?

Beth was all smiles as she sat across from Geri at a corner table with a plate piled high with eggs and bacon. Mark was behind her with a cup of coffee, which he set down beside her plate. They exchanged disgustingly flirty grins and a quick kiss, and then he acknowledged Geri with a nod before excusing himself.

“I have to get to work,” he said apologetically. “I’ll see you later.”

“Damn right you will,” Beth said with a grin.

They laughed and shared one more kiss. Then he was gone.

Geri cradled her coffee between her hands, resting her elbow on either side of her own untouched plate. “Good night, eh?”

“Mmhmm.” Beth bit off a piece of bacon. “He is just... rrawr.”

Geri arched an eyebrow. “But what about the whole thing with the cruise?”

Her assistant gestured dismissively. “Oh, he backed off. I told him it was non-negotiable, and if he brought it up again, he could go sleep on the balcony.”

That made Geri laugh. She’d known Beth long enough that she had no doubt the woman had threatened Mark with a night under the stars like that. “So he let it go?”

“Mmhmm.” She picked up her coffee. “Not that he had much opportunity—his mouth was pretty busy.”

Geri snorted. Well, at least someone had enjoyed last night. “Nicely done.” She clinked her coffee cup against Beth’s.

They continued eating their breakfast, and a few times, Beth and Mark caught each other’s eyes when he passed through the dining room on his way to take care of some task or another. She and Geri giggled a few times when a hitch in his gait or a faint grimace let on that he was a little sore. Geri was still annoyed with him over the cruise thing, but she almost felt sorry for him now—Beth had probably run him ragged last night, and he’d be feeling it all day while he was trying to work. She

doubted he had many regrets over it, though.

As breakfast wound down, Beth rubbed her temples and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Geri asked.

“Ugh.” Beth shook her head slowly and grimaced. “I don’t know. I think the trip might be catching up with me.” Lowering her hands, she exhaled and met Geri’s gaze. “If I promise that everything will be done tomorrow, do you mind if I take it easy today?”

“Go ahead.” Geri sipped her coffee. “I’m going to be in that meeting most of the day anyway, and God knows nobody else here will be working. Plus the internet is still down and we can’t call off-island, so there isn’t much you can do. Might as well enjoy the downtime.” She grinned. “Maybe Mark can come join you.”

That... didn’t brighten Beth’s expression. If anything, she looked a little green at the idea.

“You sure you’re okay?” Geri asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”

Geri was still worried, but she trusted Beth to know her limits. “Okay. Well. Take it easy, and I’ll swing by your suite later to check on you.”

“Sounds good. Have fun at the meeting, boss lady.”

Geri groaned and gave her a two-fingered salute.

Beth rose, and she patted Geri’s shoulder as she passed her chair. “See you in a few

hours.”

Then she was gone, and Geri sat back and sipped what remained of her coffee.

The tink-tink-tink of a spoon against a glass brought Geri out of her thoughts, and like everyone in the room, she turned toward the sound.

Of course, it was Kevin, and he smiled as big as he had yesterday.

“I hope everyone’s enjoyed their breakfast,” he said. “I hate to interrupt the fun, but the investor meeting is about ready to begin. If our potential investors will please come with me, we can get started.” That smile got impossibly bigger. “And as for your staff, they’re all getting the day off, courtesy of RightPriceTek.”

Members of people’s entourages murmured their enthusiastic approval.

“While we’re upstairs in the meeting room,” Kevin went on, “Your staff will be treated to a spectacular day cruise on one of RightPriceTek’s extravagant superyachts. After that, they’ll have the run of the island and will be entertained and fed to their heart’s content with complimentary food, alcohol, and resort amenities.” He gestured toward the door. “If you could all meet us down on the marina in one hour, we’ll set sail on what’s looking like a gorgeous day. As for the rest of us, though, I’m afraid we have to work before we play. But rest assured you will have plenty of time to enjoy the island and the resort after our CEO has had a chance to tell you about the exciting opportunity you all came for.”

People nodded and murmured again.

“So.” Kevin motioned toward the door. “Investors, if you could follow me...”

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In the elevator up to the floor where the investor meeting would be held, Quinn stole a surreptitious glance at Dan Woolman. Another at Elena Simmons. They were standing a foot or so apart and resolutely not looking at each other, expressions neutral and postures giving away nothing. Her ex-husband was on the opposite side of the large elevator, speaking with Art Keller.

As the elevator halted at the top and the doors opened—ah, there it was: the stolen glance and secretive grins between Dan and Elena.

Only for a second, though. As they were stepping out of the elevator, they put on their professional faces.

“Welcome to the boardroom,” Kevin told them. “If you could all have a seat at the table...” He gestured at the long table in the middle of the enormous round room.

Dan and Elena sat apart, and they each fell into relaxed conversations with the people next to them. They stole a glance again. Quick smiles. Quinn thought Dan even winked, and Elena masked a soft giggle behind her hand before shifting her attention back to something Lynette Baldwin was saying.

Quinn very nearly laughed and rolled his eyes. They were being subtle right now, but he doubted that would last. Especially since they’d been anything but subtle coming out of Elena’s room this morning before breakfast.

Quinn had been stepping out of his own suite when they’d emerged, and he hadn’t been at all surprised. Not after the way they’d been flirting in the restaurant the previous evening.

Well, he'd thought. That didn't take long.

At least they'd been quiet all night. That, or he'd just been too jetlagged to be kept awake by someone else's bedroom acrobatics.

So far, they were being fairly discreet, but he wondered how long that would last. If they decided to be as demonstrative in front of the other investors as they'd been on the way down the hall this morning, then this week could get interesting in a hurry. Though Charlie Simmons was incredibly vocal about how relieved he was to be divorced from "that gold-digging harpy," Quinn had a feeling he wouldn't be pleased if he knew someone else was boinking her. The man had been acquaintances with Quinn's late father, who'd observed several times that Charlie would fly into a rage whenever a former girlfriend took up with someone else.

"He's a child who loses interest in his new toys before Christmas is even over," he'd mused a few years ago. "But God help anyone who wants to play with those discarded toys."

As Elena and Dan had giggled on their way down the hall, his left hand planted on her ass with his wedding band catching the light—yeah, there'd be fireworks this week.

They must've known that, too, since they were keeping their distance now.

Whatever. They were into each other, so it was none of Quinn's business what Dan's wife or Elena's ex thought about anything. He'd just sit back and watch the inevitable explosions.

His musings about Dan and Elena were derailed when the boardroom doors opened, and when the man stepped in, Quinn instantly recognized Rich Price. He didn't walk into a room—he strolled in, oozing charisma like a bad overpriced cologne.

He was a tall white man in a tailored suit with a charming smile and bright blue eyes. As he introduced himself and shook hands with everyone, he carried himself with all the confidence of a man with the hubris to ask billionaires to fund his vision. The man was the generic used car salesman type, but with a bigger ego and more bravado. When he shook hands with people and greeted them, he made them feel like the only person in the universe, which made most people—especially the rich and entitled—fall all over themselves to receive his lavish praise and attention.

In fact, he reminded Quinn of a charismatic financier who'd persuaded him to play at his casino, insisting it would be “the place for high rollers” and “where A-listers come to roll the dice.” That asshole had just conveniently left out the part where those high rollers and A-listers would lose piles of money, winning only a little here and there to keep them playing. After all, he'd apparently read somewhere that losing provided more of a dopamine hit than winning, and the more people lost, the more they'd play in search of both a win and that sweet, sweet dopamine.

Last Quinn had heard, that casino was one of the deserted shithole places the locals and A-listers alike avoided, and it was only kept afloat by the desperately addicted.

Quinn had heard too many sales pitches from too many Rich Prices to believe his performance was anything more than an act meant to charm people out of their money. That wasn't to say Quinn wouldn't listen to the pitch or maybe invest in the startup, but that would depend on the substance of Price's little song and dance. Especially if he was going to break his losing streak.

It was with that in mind that Quinn kept his guard fully up as he shook hands with the man.

“I'm glad you were able to make it, Mr. Hayworth,” Rich said, keeping that smile firmly in place. “How are you liking the amenities so far?”

“The resort is amazing.” Quinn returned the smile. “If you sell this kind of air conditioning in Arizona, you’ll never want for money again.”

Rich laughed and clapped Quinn’s shoulder before releasing his hand. “I’m not in the air-conditioning business, but I can certainly pass the word along to those who are.”

“What about the lack of internet?” Kyle Aimes held up his cell phone. “No cell. No Wi-Fi. What gives?”

Rich grimaced. “I apologize for that. It was unexpected, and we’re certainly working on it. Hopefully by the time we adjourn, we’ll be connected again.”

That resulted in some unhappy muttering, but no one objected.

“We’ll continue working on the connectivity issue, and if you need or want anything else—anything at all—please let my staff know. Absolutely nothing is off the menu at Faraway Resort.”

That smile sent a prickle of unease down Quinn’s spine. He was all too familiar with what the wealthy elite would ask for when the sky was the limit. Especially when they were outside the jurisdiction of most law enforcement.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said evenly. “Thank you.”

Rich nodded, then moved on to greet Alan Robinson, the coal tycoon.

Quinn was almost overcome with the need to wipe off his hand. Rich’s hadn’t been wet or slimy, but something about the man left Quinn discreetly searching for a tissue or a bottle of hand sanitizer.

It wasn’t like this was the first time he’d encountered a salesman with weird vibes,

but the brief encounter with Rich left him feeling... off. He couldn't quite explain why.

While small talk and introductions were made, Quinn went to one of the many windows around the circular boardroom. There was a 360-degree view from up here, and from this side, all he could see was the narrow lip of rock between the building and the sheer cliffs below. Beyond that, it was just sparkling water as far as the eye could see. Not a speck of land or even a blurry red or black dot to indicate a distant cargo ship.

He shivered, telling himself it was just the high-octane air-conditioning, not the creepy, claustrophobic feeling of being on a tiny island with nowhere to go. Because as he walked around the perimeter of the boardroom and got a better view of the rest of the island—it was tiny. Narrow, anyway; not more than a mile across, if that. The skinny strip of land extended into the distance, but there was no telling how far it went. He'd been to tiny islands before that were little more than potato chip crumbs on maps, and even one that was only ten or twenty miles long could vanish over the horizon.

For all he knew, this was a peninsula jutting out from a much larger chunk of unseen land, but somehow—perhaps irrationally—he was sure that he was seeing the bulk of the island from this window.

Was claustrophobic even the right word? Because he wasn't inside a tight box or a cramped space. He was surrounded by miles and miles of open ocean.

But he was on this tiny island, confined by its suffocating coastline and unable to make contact with the outside world.

That feeling only intensified when his gaze landed on the airstrip to the north of the hotel. There was a single helicopter, but not one airplane. There was no hangar,

either.

Hadn't, like, half the people in this room come in on private jets? Where were all the aircraft?

Quinn's stomach clenched and his neck prickled. Was he just getting paranoid? Feeling untethered because his electronics didn't work and he couldn't connect to anyone off-island? What the hell was—

"If everyone could please take their seats," Rich said over the murmur of conversation. "We can kick off this meeting."

Quinn swallowed his nerves and followed the others to the long table. As he eased into a plush leather swivel chair, he vowed that Rich was going to have to work hard to persuade him to invest in this cause. Quinn's every instinct suddenly screamed to not only decline to invest, but to get the fuck off this island sooner than later.

Good thing he was a pro at deflecting sales tactics. He'd sit through the meeting—or meetings, because God knew there was never just one—and smile and nod and shake hands and all that shit. And then he'd leave without giving Rich Price or his company a single red penny.

Rich stood at the head of the table. Two of his employees, Tyson and Kevin, began distributing leather portfolios to each attendee.

When Tyson laid the portfolio in front of Quinn, Quinn mused to himself that at least he was getting some nice swag out of this. It even had his name embossed in gold lettering.

You'll have to work harder than that to get my money, Price.

He opened the cover and found some of the typical corporate trash—brochures about both the company and the resort, ads for nearby companies providing excursions for everything from scuba diving to skydiving. There was also a copy of the NDA Quinn had signed before coming here, as if he hadn't kept a copy of it for himself.

Whatever.

He closed the portfolio and laid it down, nudging it up next to a tablet that was propped up in front of him. Each person had such a tablet, and there was a large flatscreen covering two of the boardroom's windows. Great—there'd be some kind of electronic presentation, too. Hopefully a video or a film; those were at least moderately more interesting than brain-melting slide decks.

Quinn sat back in his chair, hands folded in his lap, and waited for the sales pitch to begin.

He didn't have to wait long.

“Welcome, everyone, to Faraway Resort.” Rich smiled that unsettlingly charming smile. “First, I'd like to apologize to all of you, and not just for the electronic difficulties.”

Quinn fought the urge to fidget. He glanced at some of the other investors, and they too seemed mildly uncomfortable. Maybe not as on-edge as he was, but guarded.

“The truth, my friends, is that we're not actually looking for investors into our company.” Rich affected an air of playful contrition. “But in order to get the right people for this particular project, we had to be... slightly dishonest.”

Chairs squeaked. People looked at each other with expressions that asked “did you know about this?” Quinn gnawed his lip and tried not to think about that giant

expanse of ocean outside.

“The real reason I asked you here is not as investors,” Rich said, “but as philanthropic competitors on a new and unique reality show.”

Quinn’s jaw went slack in the same instant his stomach dropped. A reality show? Seriously?

“I’m not here to be on a ridiculous TV show!” Alan Robinson declared. “How dare you?”

Rich spread his hands. “I figured you would all require some persuasion, so—”

“Persuasion, hell!” Art Keller barked. “I never signed up for this! You can’t just force us to—”

“On the contrary.” Rich gestured at the tablets in front of them. “You all willingly and eagerly signed up.”

“Bullshit!” Dan Woolman smacked his palm onto the table. “I did no such thing!”

“Didn’t you?” Rich’s smarmy smile made Quinn’s stomach turn. “Are you sure about that?”

Dan opened his mouth to speak, but he stopped when all the tablet screens came to life.

Quinn leaned in, brow furrowed. On his screen, a PDF of a document appeared. He immediately recognized it as, yes, an agreement to appear in a reality show. He’d been on such a show before, and the verbiage was very, very similar, just with different names and specifics.

And at the bottom was his signature. And his attorney's.

The fuck? He'd sworn after his first reality show that he'd never do one again. There was no way he'd agreed to this one.

"This is fake!" Charlie Simmons growled. "This is a forgery!"

"Is it, though?" Rich grinned. "Because..." He clicked a remote in his hand, and the screen on the wall came to life. Two clicks later, there was a video of Charlie in a conference room with Rich and several other people in suits.

"This sounds like a fantastic idea," Charlie was saying as he uncapped a fountain pen. "And all the money goes to charity? Do we get to pick the charities?"

"There are some organizations that RightPriceTek is going to support with the show," Rich told him, "but if you turn the page, you'll find a place to list charities you'd like to add."

Charlie turned the page, peered at it, and nodded. "Excellent. This is excellent."

Here in the boardroom, Rich turned to Charlie. "I think you'll find a jury will be inclined to side with a defendant who has a signed contract and a video over a plaintiff who insists he didn't agree to be involved."

A chill went through Quinn's bones. Holy shit...

Charlie stared at Rich, utterly stunned.

Rich clicked the remote again, and the PDFs on the tablets vanished, replaced by videos. Quinn's lips parted as he watched himself walking into a place he'd never been in his life. With his lawyer on his heels, he entered a conference room he'd

never seen and started shaking hands with people he'd never met. Had he been drunk?

On the screen, he and his lawyer chatted and schmoozed, and then the camera cut to him signing something.

"It's to benefit charity," Quinn told the camera, smiling wide. "What's not to love?"

In the present, Quinn gulped. He'd said those words before, but not about this reality show. When agreeing to a charity poker tournament, sure. Attending lavish galas and sponsoring sporting events, absolutely.

But not this.

What the fuck was happening?

At the other end of the table, Kit Mason shook her head and flailed a hand at her tablet. "This isn't me! I've never seen these people! This is fake!"

"Perhaps it is." Rich's smile remained smarmy, though it somehow also brought down the temperature in the already cold room. "But I have signed contracts from all of you, and I have videos of each and every one of you signing them. Should you decide to renege and back out, then I can't imagine what that will do to your reputations. Especially since each of your chosen charities has already been notified they will be receiving five million dollars just for your participation." He half-shrugged. "But if you back out of your contracts before filming is complete, they'll receive nothing."

Well, fuck. If Quinn had one soft spot, it was for kids' charities, and there was no way in hell he was going to let these people tell one of those organizations he'd bailed and left them high and dry. He was still uneasy about this whole thing—still

pissed that he'd been duped—but at the same time... kids. Even if he took it to court and challenged the validity of the contract, his public image would struggle to recover from “Billionaire Quinn Hayworth Takes Producers to Court to get out of Reality Show Benefitting Kids’ Charities.”

He had to admit—Rich Price knew how to get someone by the balls.

He scanned the table, and though he wasn't surprised by how obviously conflicted some of the others were, he was disgusted by it. Okay, so they'd been conned into participating in a reality show. But it was for charity. And it was just a reality show. He'd done one before for shits and giggles; it hadn't been as fun as he'd hoped—lots of grueling hours and heavily scripted “spontaneous” moments—but it hadn't been terrible. How bad could this be? Play some stupid games. Maybe endure some public humiliation. Hell, it might even be fun as long as this wasn't one of those shows where they had to eat gross things.

If they'd had to trick everyone into signing up, though, that could be a red flag. On the other hand, it might be part of the show's shtick: “we tricked a dozen billionaires into playing our game!” Knowing the producers of the last show he'd been on, not to mention another that had tried to rope him in, that wouldn't be out of character.

Sighing, he sat back in his chair. Fine. Fine . He'd play their silly games and hopefully make some money for the organization he'd allegedly picked. And even if he lost, they'd get five million, plus he'd definitely be sending them more once he was back in Arizona.

Geri Cole was one of the few who didn't appear conflicted. Unsettled and displeased, sure, and clearly annoyed, but much like Kyle Aimes and Eric Valentine, she didn't seem to be fighting it. That tracked; like Quinn, she probably didn't appreciate being duped, but she wasn't going to yank money out of a charity's hands. Along with Kyle and Eric, she seemed to be willing to play along, same as Quinn.

The other unwitting players? Not so much.

Across the table, Charlie Simmons glared at his phone, then slammed it facedown beside the tablet. Quinn didn't have to ask; cell service and Wi-Fi had evidently not been restored. Charlie had probably attempted to reach out to his attorneys, but without any signal or Wi-Fi, that wasn't happening.

"This is bullshit," Charlie growled. "I'll make sure every media outlet knows you conned us all into this. And I own two of the country's largest newspapers!"

Rich smiled again. "By all means, Mr. Simmons. Let the country know that twelve of the richest people in the world had to be tricked into helping the less fortunate, and even then they didn't want to follow through."

Charlie stared at him, mouth open but no sounds coming out.

Rich just chuckled. "Also, I must give credit where it's due." He gestured toward Paul O'Connor, who was sitting to Quinn's right. "Without the generative AI technology developed by Mr. O'Connor's company, OysterAI, we wouldn't have been able to create videos nearly as convincing as these."

Instantly, several people were shouting over each other, declaring that Rich had admitted the videos were fake, and therefore everything was null and void. They pounded the table and declared Rich a fraud, but the man just smiled and calmly shot down their accusations.

While the chaos continued, Quinn turned to Paul. The man had gone completely white, and he genuinely seemed like he might throw up on the table.

Quinn nudged him. "Hey. You okay?"

Paul turned wide eyes on him. Quinn had heard people say someone looked like they'd seen a ghost, and he suddenly understood on a bone-deep level what that meant. "They used..." He flailed a hand at the screen. "This isn't what my tech is supposed to be used for!"

Quinn pressed his lips together, biting back a pointed, "What the fuck did you think people would use it for?"

Hell, he already knew of at least one marriage that had imploded because of a damning video that the wife still swore up and down was fake. A rising star politician in Quinn's social circles had had his campaign derailed after lewd AI-generated images were spread around; even though they'd been soundly debunked, the stink of the scandal still stuck to him, and it was unlikely his career would ever recover. Just a few months ago, a friend of a friend's entire life had imploded after footage emerged of him with some very, very underage sexual partners. An investigator's revelation that she could prove the videos were AI-generated fakes had come three days after the man's suicide.

As much as Quinn didn't appreciate getting tricked into this competition, he couldn't help thinking Paul was getting some well-deserved karma. Maybe being roped into a reality show would make him think twice about the tech his company produced.

Sucks when the face-eating leopards you created eat your face, doesn't it, pal?

"What about our companies?" Dan Woolman demanded. "We still have businesses to run!"

"Of course you do," Rich said. "And all your entourages have been informed that you'll be indisposed for a few weeks. That little excursion this morning? They're all heading back to St. Martin for an all-inclusive vacation on me, with transportation back home if they need to be present to run anything." He waved dismissively.

“They’ll notify the proper people and pull the proper strings to ensure your companies run just as smoothly as they do when you’re golfing, mountain climbing, or vacationing in some faraway place.”

The other investors—Quinn’s competitors—spoke over each other, outraged by Rich’s audacity.

Geri, though, looked like she’d just read some ominous test results. Horror filled her expression, and it intensified as she shifted in her seat and flicked her gaze toward the elevator. Had she caught on to something he hadn’t? God, was this somehow even worse than all of them being fraudulently roped into a stupid reality show?

Rich apparently didn’t expect them to film or do much of anything today. Maybe he was giving them a day to collect their bearings before he started putting them to work as they’d (allegedly) agreed. Whatever the case, he dismissed the meeting not long after, and while a few people stayed behind to plead their cases and threaten him into letting them out of their contracts, others headed for the elevator.

That was where Quinn caught up with Geri. “Hey. You okay?”

Geri shook her head. “No.” As she stared at the numbers descending above the doors, she said, “My assistant didn’t go on the excursion.”

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“Are you sure she didn’t go?” Quinn asked as they stepped off the elevator into the lobby.

“I’m sure.” Geri strode toward the other bank of elevators. “She’s terrified of the water—there’s no way she’d go out on a boat.”

Not willingly, anyway.

“So you think she stayed behind?” he asked.

Geri nodded and jabbed the call button several times. “And if I’m stuck here for God knows how long instead of a week, I need her off the island.” She glanced at him. “She’s got prescription medication that will run out before then, and she cannot run out.”

“Oh shit,” Quinn said.

“Yeah.”

“Let me know if I can help with anything,” he offered.

She nodded sharply. “Thanks.”

The doors opened, and she stepped inside. This building’s elevators were impressively fast, but they seemed to be crawling now. Heart thumping and stomach somersaulting, she watched the numbers counting up to the floor where she and Beth were staying.

As soon as the doors were far enough apart to let her through, she took off running.

“Beth!” She ran down the hall. “Beth!” At her assistant’s suite, she banged on the door. “Beth, are you in here?”

There was no answer.

“Come on, Beth.” Geri hit the door harder, and she tried the handle even though she knew that wouldn’t work. “Beth! Open up!”

No answer.

Fuck. She’d need someone to open it for her. Or maybe Beth had gone downstairs in search of food.

“Goddammit,” Geri muttered, and she hurried back to the elevators. On the way back down, horror dawned as she replayed everything over breakfast. How Beth’s paramour had been so aggressive about her getting on the boat, and how uncomfortable that had made Beth. And how Beth hadn’t been feeling well after breakfast, and had gone back to the room.

Mark. She had to find Mark. If he didn’t tell her where Beth was, she’d use his head as a battering ram to knock down Beth’s door.

She made it about three steps out of the elevator before she spotted him across the lobby, and she sprinted toward him. “You.” She grabbed his arm. “Where is she? What did you do to her?”

He put up his hands, staring at her with wide eyes. “Whoa, whoa, she’s—”

“She’s not answering her door, and she was acting weird over breakfast.” She thrust a

finger into his face. “Where is—”

“She’s on the boat,” he blurted out.

Geri froze. “What the fuck do you mean, she’s on the boat? She’s terrified of water.” She got up in his face. “What did you do to her?”

“I...” Mark glanced around the lobby, which was starting to get loud with pissed-off billionaires. Then he gestured for her to come with him. Geri still wanted to throttle him, but he was the only one who knew Beth’s whereabouts, so she grudgingly followed him. Alone in a hallway off the lobby, Mark met her gaze and lowered his voice. “Look, I didn’t have a choice. I needed her to get on the boat, which she did. She’s safe .”

It took a second for Geri’s confused and terrified brain to catch up. “You knew. You knew what was going to...” She swallowed bile. “What the hell is going on?”

“Beth is safe,” he repeated. “When I realized she wouldn’t get on the boat, I drugged her and made sure she was onboard.”

“Why?” Geri glared at him. “Just because you wanted to fuck her before she left? What about everyone else on this island? If you knew what was happening, why—”

“I did not drug her so I could fuck her,” he threw back. “Everything we did in bed was completely consensual. The only time I gave her anything was this morning because I didn’t know how else to make sure she got off the island.” His features hardened and his eyes narrowed. “Because I know what’s going to happen, and while I couldn’t give less of a fuck what happens to you and the other assholes staying here, she doesn’t deserve what you all have coming.”

Geri blinked. “What are you talking about? I thought this was just a reality show?”

He gave a cold, caustic laugh. “Well, ‘reality’ is definitely the word I’d use.” Then he stalked away, leaving her standing there with her jaw hanging open.

She was grateful that Beth was safe, even if she’d had to be drugged and taken onto a boat despite her phobia of water.

But what did he mean about “what you all have coming” ? Something that Beth didn’t deserve? Something about “reality” ?

Geri’s blood turned cold. There was more to this than a reality show, wasn’t there? Something that had compelled an employee to do whatever it took to get Beth off the island, even if it meant drugging her and throwing her on a boat despite her fears.

What the fuck is happening?

Some pieces were starting to fall into place, and with each click, her stomach knotted tighter. Her skin had begun crawling during the “investor meeting,” especially after the tablet had played a video of her negotiating and signing her contract. It had shown her against a background she didn’t recognize, and her ears still rang with the sound of her videoed self enthusiastically looking forward to being on the show.

Mark’s voice echoed in her mind:

“Because I know what’s going to happen, and while I couldn’t give less of a fuck what happens to you and the other assholes staying here, she doesn’t deserve what you all have coming.”

“Oh, shit,” Geri whispered.

This wasn’t just a quirky reality show, was it? Rich Price had something far uglier up his sleeve, and Geri, along with eleven other people, were trapped.

“Geri?” Quinn’s voice turned her head. He’d been in the restaurant, and he came across the lobby toward her, alarm written all over his face. “Did you find her?”

“I...” Geri glanced around. None of Rich’s employees were in sight, but that didn’t mean there weren’t cameras or speakers. She took Quinn by the elbow and steered him back toward the restaurant. “I need a cigarette.”

He didn’t protest, though he was clearly puzzled.

The restaurant was eerily empty now. One of Rich’s guys was behind the bar, looking bored, and two others milled around near the exits.

Sentries?

No, no. This wasn’t anything that sinister.

The men tossing a body bag onto a flatbed truck flashed through her mind.

The Humvee with the mounted gun turret.

This... wasn’t... anything sinister. Was it?

She pushed open the patio doors and instantly had to cough from the thick humidity. The heat was like a wall that she smacked into face first after the hotel’s bitterly cold, dry air.

After a second or two, though, she adjusted, and she cleared her throat as she shakily pulled out her cigarettes and lighter.

Beside her, Quinn leaned against the concrete railing and took out a vape pen. “So... what’s going on? Where’s your assistant?”

Geri took a drag and blew it out, scanning the patio for anyone who might be listening. Elena Simmons and Dan Woolman were having a quiet conversation in one corner. Tyson was by the entrance to the restaurant, glaring at everything.

She and Quinn had a little space and privacy, though she couldn't be sure there weren't cameras or speakers everywhere. So, she just told Quinn what she knew to be true—that her assistant had slept with one of Rich's employees, who'd then drugged her to make sure she got on the boat. And she told him what Mark had said about what they all "deserved."

"What does that even mean?" he asked. "What the hell is going on?"

Geri shook her head and took another drag from her cigarette. "I have no idea. But I don't think we're getting the whole story from Rich Price."

He shuddered. "I don't think I want the whole story."

She couldn't argue with that.

But she knew they were going to find out whether they wanted to or not.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

After breakfast the next morning, everyone was summoned back up to the boardroom. They were all sullen and irritated, still clearly displeased at being tricked. Geri and Quinn exchanged uneasy glances, which told him that sleeping on it hadn't assuaged any of her worries about what would come next.

But they didn't have much choice, so they trooped upstairs with everyone else.

In the boardroom, there were three manned cameras, and Quinn thought there were a couple of less obtrusive ones as well. A half-sphere in the ceiling above the center of the table reminded him of the eye in the sky cameras at casinos.

Apparently filming would begin today. Greeaaat.

Rich took his place at the head of the table again, and he met them all with a genial smile. "First things first, I know some of you are unhappy about how you ended up here and on this show. And for that, I apologize. To make up for it, I'm offering a one-time ticket out of the game and off the island."

Everyone leaned in.

"Your golden ticket," he explained, "is a purge of your wealth and assets. You will be left with a maximum of two hundred and fifty million in liquid cash, stocks, cryptocurrencies, and similar assets. You will retain one of your residences and no more than two of your personal vehicles. Trust funds will be established for each of your children for a maximum of fifty million dollars apiece, which will not count toward your two hundred and fifty million total. Any assets in excess of those I've listed will be liquidated, with funds distributed to charitable organizations of your

choice.” He paused. “Charitable organizations that have been vetted as reputable and actually helpful, not just money-laundering schemes for the obscenely wealthy.”

No one said a word. No one made a sound.

Rich continued, “We understand that a sudden purge of assets isn’t practical, particularly when it comes to stocks in publicly traded companies. Instead, you will simply agree to a notarized pledge to divest yourselves of the agreed upon wealth over a reasonable period of time—between one and ten years, depending upon your net worth.”

He paused and clicked a remote that Quinn hadn’t noticed in his hand. Behind the man and on every screen at the table, bullet points appeared, echoing everything Rich had offered.

“We had considered also requiring the complete liquidation of jewelry,” he said, “but we do understand the sentimental value of family heirlooms. Instead, we will limit the reduction of jewelry to fifty percent of all such items acquired within the past twenty years, excluding wedding jewelry and gifts from children.”

His list went on from there. Any and all antiquities or cultural items had to be returned to their countries or tribes of origin. Twenty-five percent of art collections could be retained, with the remainder donated—free and clear, not just loaned—to art museums of RightPriceTek’s choosing. Watercraft and aircraft were to be sold or donated to organizations that could use them for humanitarian projects.

Quinn admittedly kind of enjoyed watching Charlie Simmons, Art Keller, and Eric Valentine blanch at that one. They probably had the vapors over their superyachts and cushy private jets being used by the unwashed masses for non-profit purposes.

His amusement was mild, though, because holy shit, Rich was driving a hard bargain.

The sheer volume of assets Quinn would have to liquidate in order to get off this island was staggering. Which house did he keep? Which cars? And his mother would be turning in her grave if she knew he was even considering putting her vast collection of modern art into a museum where the plebs could view it.

Rejecting the offer as Rich was framing it was a no-brainer to Quinn—keep all his assets, put up with a few weeks on a reality show, and then return to his normal life.

But the conversation Quinn had had yesterday with Geri made him wonder just how much more there was to this that they hadn't yet been told.

Eric cleared his throat. "How exactly do we explain this, uh, divestment to our families? Our shareholders?"

Rich grinned, sending a chill through Quinn. "We have, of course"—he pressed the clicker—"thought of everything."

A video began on the big flatscreen. It was Art Keller, seated in an antique armchair between a leafy houseplant and a fireplace.

"I had an epiphany," Art was in the middle of saying. "Realized that I'm only here for a little while. What good is a man who dies on top of a pile of wealth when he had the means and the technology to help millions, but didn't?"

Quinn would have absolutely bought that this was a real, if uncharacteristic, interview if the actual Art Keller didn't turn white as a sheet and make a sound like he was being strangled.

The video changed to Kit Mason of MasonChem, and the real Kit made a similar noise before the one on the screen began to speak. "The science is there. We can't look at all these findings about pesticides being linked to cancer and contaminated

water supplies and just pretend there's nothing we can do. Or that there's nothing we're willing to do. It won't be cheap, but it's a mess my organization made, so footing the bill is the least we can do." She smiled, earnestly and sincerely. "And it's only the beginning of what we will do."

Then Geri was on the screen, sitting for what looked like a television interview. "I guess you could call it my Tony Stark moment. When I saw up close what my company's equipment was doing to all these innocent people, when I saw our logo on shrapnel next to dead children, I couldn't just sit back and let it keep happening." She laughed. "Building an Iron Man suit is a little out of my wheelhouse, but I can at least help finance groups who can undo the damage Cole Industries and my family have done."

Across from Quinn, Geri looked like she might get sick.

Quinn could barely breathe. Didn't sound like anyone else could either. Those interviews were absolutely convincing, and what the hell was anyone going to do? Go on-camera to say someone made a fake video of them being a decent human being for once, and that they'd be keeping their cash? Once those videos saw the light of day, there was no going back. Not without the kind of PR shitstorm that people in this room had nightmares about.

A few seats over, Paul O'Connor was so pale, he was nearly translucent. Quinn thought he deserved that. After all, it was his tech that had made these videos possible.

"So, as I said," Rich went on, "we've thought of everything." He clicked the remote, and the interviews disappeared from the big screen, replaced by the bullet points detailing his golden ticket offer. "Anyone wants to leave the island, those are the terms and conditions." He scanned the room. "Any takers?"

Again, no one said a word. No one made a sound.

Quinn swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry and his heart pounding. This was a dangerous gamble. There was no telling what was behind door number two, only what was being offered behind door number one and the alarming gut feelings about door number two. Rationally, he knew he should jump at the chance to get the hell out of here. Better safe than sorry, and all that.

The gambler, though. The gambler on a losing streak, desperate for the kind of win that took the sting out of all those losses, wanted—needed—to spin the wheel.

Take what you've won?

Or let it ride?

“Anyone?” Price gestured behind himself at the bullet points on the screen. “Anyone at all willing to accept this more than generous offer?”

Two hundred and fifty million dollars, plus his primary residence and two of his vehicles?

Or... face whatever fuckery Rich had up his sleeve?

“Any takers?” Rich's voice hardened just slightly. “Because this is a one-time offer, my friends. Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Quinn looked around. So did everyone else.

No one volunteered.

Let it ride, that inner voice demanded.

“Going once?” Price asked. “Going twice?”

Last chance. Do it? Don’t? Do it?

Quinn folded his sweaty hands in his lap. Across from him, Geri was clearly conflicted as well, gnawing her lip and fidgeting in her chair. He fully expected her hand to go up; as nervous as she was, she should’ve been jumping at the first chance to bail.

But she didn’t. If he had to guess, she was running the numbers in her head, and the reduction in her assets was too great. Quinn was worth about four billion. Geri was worth three or four times that much, and that was being very conservative. Dropping from that to a quarter of a billion dollars? Yeah, that might be a tall order, even if door number two promised to be a disaster.

But it was just a reality show. How bad could it be?

Spin the wheel. Let it ride. See what’s behind door number two.

No one else claimed the golden ticket either.

“All right.” Rich grinned, which made his eyes look icy. “Since you’ve all decided to pass, now we move on to the game.”

Blood pounded in Quinn’s ears. This was what he lived for—the thrill of being a high roller. Hopefully it would pay off this time, too.

At Rich’s cue, Kevin and Tyson began distributing spiralbound books to each person at the table. As they did, he explained, “These books will answer any questions you have about the show and the organization. The shooting schedule. Dress code for boardroom appearances and outdoor challenges.” He paused. “If by chance, you don’t

have clothing suitable for a shoot, please let the hotel staff know and they will send a stylist to your room.” He smiled thinly. “Judging by the volume of luggage many of you brought, I suspect you’re covered, though.”

The group chuckled quietly, if a bit nervously.

Quinn had packed light because that was how he preferred to travel, but he suspected he had everything he needed. Unless an event was white tie formal, he was prepared.

“You’ll have plenty of time to read that over this evening,” Rich said. “For now, let’s begin with your first challenge.”

Quinn fought the urge to drum his nails on the table. From the way several others were fidgeting, he wasn’t alone.

“This competition is, of course, primarily to benefit charities,” Rich said. “Your participation—and of course, the winner’s jackpot—will go to the organization of your choice. This challenge, however, will benefit organizations we’ve selected.”

The screens in front of the players lit up again.

On Quinn’s there was an organization he thought was committed to restoring wetlands and waterways in the Pacific Northwest; he remembered his father complaining that they were trying to impede progress on a few huge developments outside of Seattle.

Beside him, Eric Valentine’s showed an organization that appeared to help underpaid retail and warehouse workers make ends meet and unionize. Next to Eric, Paul O’Connor’s screen had the name of an anti-human trafficking organization.

“The task is quite simple,” Rich said. “Pledge a dollar amount of your choice to be

donated to the organization on your screen.” He held up a finger and grinned. “The challenge is this—whoever contributes the smallest amount will be eliminated from the competition.”

Quinn’s stomach knotted, and he wasn’t sure why. The task really was simple. And he could imagine a few people at the table deliberately lowballing it to get kicked off the show and be done with it. But something about it made his insides twist and his neck prickle. Maybe the unnerving glint in Rich Price’s eye? Maybe this whole situation that still didn’t feel quite right? Maybe the things Mark had said to Geri?

He didn’t know. But he didn’t like it.

Rich continued, “Of course, not everyone in this room has the same net worth. We can hardly expect someone worth two billion to pony up the same as someone worth ten. So, everyone will be assigned point values based on the percentage of their net worth.” His smile sent an uncomfortable chill up Quinn’s spine. “We do, after all, like a level playing field.”

Quinn caught Geri’s eye across the table. Though she was keeping a professional facade, he thought he saw some uneasiness in her expression. Or maybe he was just projecting.

The doors opened, making everyone jump. Someone wheeled in a portable computer console, and he parked it near where Rich was standing, with the screen facing away from everyone. One of the cameramen positioned himself beside it. According to Rich’s instructions, the contestants would come up one by one and enter their donation into the computer.

That was... weird. Would this even be an entertaining show? Of course, anything could be entertaining with some creative editing. And he did remember some of the earlier challenges on his previous show being tedious and dull in person, but much

more interesting in the final product. If nothing else, they were getting a ton of footage of the contestants fidgeting and sweating, watching each other and worrying about what they should put into the computer.

So... maybe it would work? But in the moment, Jesus, it wasn't very entertaining. Unless people really got a kick out of watching a boardroom full of nervous, twitchy billionaires.

Given the number of "eat the rich" memes floating around, he supposed that was possible.

While other players went up to the console, Quinn hemmed and hawed about what number he'd put in. He wasn't as rich as most of the people in this room. Charlie, Elena, Paul, Geri, and Kyle all had at least one more zero on their net worths than he did. Some of the others probably did as well. Even with the show using their point system to level the playing field, he had no idea how much anyone else was willing to put up. And it wasn't the end of the world if he got eliminated, but he was too competitive—too much of a gambler—to surrender to the idea of being the first one off the show. He'd made it to third place last time. He wasn't going to be the first to do the walk of shame.

"Quinn Hayworth." Rich gestured at the console. "If you would, please."

Oh fuck. Here we go.

Swallowing hard, Quinn rose. He crossed the room and stood at the console, pretending not to notice the cameras pointed at him. Especially the one peering over his shoulder.

The computer screen in front of him was blank except for a single prompt.

Quinn Hayworth donation amount.

He took a deep breath. Well, go big or go home.

Then he typed out, \$25 million .

Submit.

And... done.

Okay. That was easy. He returned to his seat, and... that was it. He just waited for everyone else to finish.

When they had, Rich said, “All right. That concludes this challenge. You’re all welcome to enjoy the resort’s amenities. We’ll convene here first thing in the morning to reveal the results of the challenge.”

And... that was that.

They were dismissed.

Ooh... kay?

Quinn followed everyone out of the room, and he decided he’d made the right choice, sticking with this instead of taking the golden ticket. After their first challenge, it seemed like they were in the process of making a reality show that would be so damn boring, it would never be aired anywhere anyway.

But Quinn also couldn’t shake the feeling he was missing something. That maybe he should have taken Rich up on the golden ticket off the island.

Except... no. That was stupid. What could he possibly lose on a reality show that would be worse than drastically reducing his entire fortune? His family's legacy?

Fuck that. He would play this game, boring and ridiculous as it was, and then go back to his incredible life.

Everything would be fine.

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Geri vacillated between annoyed and unsettled.

She was still pissed that the producers had gone to such shady lengths to get her on this show. They could've just asked, for God's sake. A stupid reality show to help some charities? Sure, why not?

Eh. Maybe this meant her gut feelings had been off. It wouldn't be the first time. Her dad had raised her to be suspicious of everyone. Always assume everyone had ulterior motives, whether they were trying to get a bigger tip or screw her out of a lucrative contract. Always expect the worst.

On her way out of her room, Geri pulled her hoodie tighter around her shoulders. She'd almost neglected to pack it—she'd been on her way to the Caribbean, after all—but she'd experienced a few hotels that were chilly enough to warrant it. Especially in hotter climates. So she'd learned the hard way to make sure she packed some sweatpants and sweatshirts, if only for lounging around in her suite.

Normally, she wouldn't venture out in one, but this entire place was so damn cold, she kept the hoodie on as she headed downstairs to have lunch with everyone else.

The hotel restaurant was freezing cold, and it was stark and empty without so many people. There were a couple of employees—a bartender and a server—and the only patrons were the twelve “contestants.”

The place sure wasn't quiet, though.

“That golden ticket was insulting,” Art said to the others. “Who in their right mind

would take that kind of deal just to get out of a show like this?” He scoffed and brought his drink to his lips. “I don’t like how they got us on this stupid show, but I’m not giving up everything I’ve worked my ass off for just to get out of here early.”

“The nerve of these fuckers,” Dan said. “And what nonsense. All of this. If they wanted money, just throw a black-tie gala, feed us some godawful banquet food, and tell me who to make the check out to.” He rolled his eyes.

Beside him, Elena scowled. “Is this the way they get money for charity now? Trick us and, I don’t know, probably embarrass us, given how these stupid shows usually go?” She wrinkled her nose. “I can’t even imagine what other ‘challenges’ he’s going to throw our way.”

“As long as they don’t have us eating anything weird,” Eric muttered. “They tell me I’m eating a crocodile’s nuts or something...” He drew a finger across his throat. “I’ll happily be the first eliminated.”

Nods and murmurs all around.

Geri was inclined to agree with her affronted peers, especially about being asked to eat something ghastly, but she wasn’t inclined to stick around and listen to them all bitch about it. At least until someone could get a signal and reach out to an attorney back home, there wasn’t much to do but go with the flow of this silly game.

She took her plate and drink, and stepped out onto the empty patio. With her food on one of the wrought iron tables, she shrugged off her hoodie and dropped it into an empty chair. The humidity was thick and the heat was intense, but it was a pleasant change after the icy hotel. The lack of bitching from her fellow contestants was replaced by the chirping and shrieking of seabirds and—she guessed—birds in the jungle just beyond the patio. The tide rolled gently in the background, and a nice breeze whispered through the fronds of palm trees and potted plants.

This wasn't so bad, all things considered. When she'd come to the island, she'd resigned herself to being around people all the time. Even during the periods when she could relax on a beach with a book, there would always be voices and activity nearby. The only real solitude she could expect was in her suite, especially since the noise could carry up to her balcony.

This, though—this was nice. The food was good. The chicken breast was cooked perfectly. It had been marinated in some kind of sauce that was both sweet and savory, and spiced with flavors she couldn't quite put her finger on. It was accompanied by some fresh vegetables in lemon juice and a rice dish with some sweet tropical fruits.

Footsteps approached, and she closed her eyes as she chewed. She wasn't even sure who she hoped it was. One of the bar employees, maybe? Someone coming out for a quiet smoke? Because she really, really didn't feel like interacting with anyone else. She just wanted to eat in peace.

“Mind if I sit?”

She was pleasantly surprised to realize it was Quinn, and when she looked up at him, he smiled nervously; this wasn't a man who asked “mind if I sit?” because he was just going to do it anyway. The question seemed genuine, and she appreciated that.

“Sure.” She gestured at the two empty seats.

He relaxed a little and took the one across from her. He also had a plate in his hand along with a glass of ice water with lemon. He'd gone for one of the beef dishes on offer, though she couldn't quite recall what it was. Something with a brown gravy and a lot of potatoes and other root vegetables. There was also a small salad with a vinaigrette of some sort.

She suddenly wished she'd gone for a salad, too. She'd been too cold to think about getting one inside, but now that she was out here where it was warm, it sounded refreshing.

They ate in silence for a little while. She wondered if he was also enjoying the serene atmosphere of the patio. Compared to the echoing complaints inside the cavernous restaurant, it was remarkably peaceful out here.

She regarded him while she chewed a piece of chicken. Though she'd heard his name over the years, they'd never crossed paths before. Not that she was aware of, anyway. They both rubbed elbows with society's uppermost strata, but they didn't move in the same circles. Her father had been acquaintances with the Hayworth patriarch, and her parents had attended the funeral of him and his wife a few months before her father died. They hadn't been close, though. She had no idea if Quinn had come to her father's memorial; she'd been so overwhelmed with his sudden death, taking the reins of the company, and consoling her mother and sister that she barely remembered the service at all.

As she was finishing her meal, Quinn broke the silence. "How far do you think we'll get into this game before Charlie Simmons and Dan Woolman kill each other?"

Geri sat up. "What makes you think they will?"

He gestured with his fork at the restaurant. "Well, I'd bet good money that Dan is screwing Charlie's ex-wife."

She glanced toward the restaurant, then back at him. "You think so?"

"They came out of her room together." He jabbed a carrot with his fork. "And Charlie was looking at them like he wanted to shoot them both."

Geri laughed. “I’m sure the producers will be thrilled, then.” She reached for her wineglass. “They won’t even have to do any creative editing to fabricate the drama.”

“I know, right?” He popped the carrot into his mouth. “Maybe that’ll keep them from making up as much bullshit about the rest of us.”

“Ugh. God, I hope so.” She rolled her eyes. “I can see why they tricked us—I never would’ve signed up for this voluntarily. Never .”

He quirked his lips. “I’d like to say I wouldn’t have, but I’ve done one before, so...” He rocked his head from side to side.

“Have you?”

“Mmhmm.” He took a swig of water. “You remember that show Fear Factor that was on, I don’t know, eighty years ago?”

She nodded. “You were on that?”

“No, no. But I think the show was trying desperately to be a Fear Factor knockoff. It involved a lot of stunts and physical challenges. They weren’t scary or anything—well, most of them—but they were kind of humiliating.” He swirled his water like wine. “I think they were going for how much will you let us laugh at you in exchange for winning or something.”

Geri cocked a brow. “How did you do?”

“Came in third,” he said proudly, then rolled his eyes and laughed. “God, it was so stupid. So fucking stupid. I mean, it was kind of fun at times? But mostly it was either painful, humiliating, or both.”

“Painful?” Alarm zipped through her. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. When you’re swinging across monkey bars and you fall, it’s gonna hurt even if you land on a mat.” He grimaced. “I did this one thing where we—well, it doesn’t matter, but when I fell, there were these like padded poles below us? I don’t remember what they were for, but they were like horizontal telephone poles covered in padding. I landed right on my back over one of those.” He shuddered and brought his glass up to his lips. “I still feel that one sometimes.”

She made a face. “Oh God. That doesn’t sound fun.”

“It wasn’t.” He tipped his head toward the hotel. “So who knows what these assholes have up their sleeves? Right now, it seems like their idea of entertaining television is having us come up and punch numbers into a computer.” He rolled his eyes. “Real exciting material, there.”

Geri laughed. “Well, I think I’ll take boring over getting hurt any day of the week.”

“You and me both.”

“I still don’t know how legal it is, how they roped us into it, but...” She gestured toward the marina where not a single boat was moored. “I’m not really sure how to leave, you know? Or, well, without liquidating most of my assets.”

“I know, right? And I don’t know how legal it is either.” Quinn stared out at the ocean with unfocused eyes. “The people running shows like this—they’re fucking weird. And they know all kinds of shady-ass ways to manipulate people and sneak things into contracts.” He met her gaze. “It honestly wouldn’t surprise me if they figured out how to make this perfectly legal.”

She deflated. “Awesome.” She picked up her wineglass again. “So I guess all we do

is go with the flow and hope for the best.”

“I guess so.” He held up his glass, a playful glint in his dark eyes. “May the best contestant win.”

She laughed and clinked her glass against his. “Cheers.”

Geri was tempted to wear her hoodie to the boardroom the next morning. She’d called down to the front desk about the temperature a few times, and she’d been assured they were working on it. So far, though, the hotel was still fucking freezing , and it was getting seriously uncomfortable. Here she was on a tropical island, and her damn nose was cold. What the hell?

But the producers’ book had given a rundown of what everyone was expected to wear to the various challenges, and... fine. Whatever. She’d wear a pantsuit to the boardroom. With any luck, the next challenge would be outside and she could wear shorts and a T-shirt or something.

Though she wouldn’t have been surprised if they were asked to bundle up before going out into the sweltering tropical heat. It was a reality show, after all. Anything was possible.

In the boardroom, everyone sat around the big table, same as before. There were cameras in the room, same as before.

Three familiar RightPriceTek employees stood at the edge of the room, dressed in suits, with blank faces. Kevin didn’t come across as nearly as friendly as he had when he’d picked Geri up at the airstrip. Mark’s expression was blank. Tyson... well, he always looked like an asshole waiting for an opportunity to be an asshole.

And of course, in walked Rich, their charming host who’d fooled them all into

signing up for his stupid show.

“I hope everyone slept well,” he said with a big smile. “And I hope you’re enjoying our amenities.”

No one responded, but he didn’t acknowledge that.

“We’ve calculated the results of yesterday’s challenge, and we’ve selected a winner. The winner is, quite simply, the most generous donor among you.” He held up a small plaque. “The winner of this challenge also receives this. Should you lose a challenge, you can redeem the elimination pass and have someone else eliminated in your place.”

There was a quiet murmur of interest and enthusiasm. Geri couldn’t help the laugh; seemed like everyone was not only accepting their role, they were getting into the spirit of competitiveness.

“Now, as I mentioned yesterday,” Rich said, “the scores are adjusted based on percentages of net worth. To keep things simple, we use those percentages to work out a point system, and players are awarded points commensurate with their contribution. Everyone got it?”

Nods all around. As weird as this reality show was, Geri thought that was a smart way to keep things fair and simple.

“The winner of yesterday’s challenge...” Rich clicked a button. “Elena Simmons, with nineteen points.”

Elena beamed. Charlie, of course, scowled. Knowing what she did about him, Geri suspected he was fuming at the idea of her donating his hard-earned money. Or of her having it in the first place.

Geri's late father's words echoed in her mind: "This is why you get a prenup, Geri. I don't care how much you love him—you don't marry him unless he signs one. Otherwise you'll be the one losing half your fortune to someone like Elena Simmons."

Words to live by.

After giving Elena her pass, Rich ran through everyone else's points, reading them off in descending order. Geri was relieved to come in fifth with thirteen points. Charlie Simmons, unlike his ex-wife, landed third to last with just six points. That wasn't a surprise; though Elena was hardly generous, Charlie was well-known for being a stingy son of a bitch.

"Only two contestants remain," Rich said. "One of whom will be eliminated."

Eric and Lynette both shifted and twitched in their chairs as they waited for the verdict.

"Eric," Rich said, pausing for dramatic effect. "Your pledge earned you"—he clicked the remote, and as the number appeared, added—"three points."

Eric swallowed. Lynette chewed her lip.

"If Lynette's total is below three," the host continued, "you're still in the game. If she scored four or five, you will be eliminated. And if she receives three, then there will be a tiebreaker."

Eric and Lynette nodded, both grinning with some competitive fire as they fidgeted nervously.

On the screen, Eric's name was replaced by Lynette's, with a blank spot where her

points would be.

Geri was almost annoyed by how she was hanging on every word. How the suspense of the moment had her almost literally on the edge of her seat. She hated that she was getting into this.

“Lynette.” Rich held up his remote. “Your pledge earned you...”

Geri leaned in. She thought some of the other players around her did the same.

After what seemed like way too damn long, Rich clicked the button.

Beneath Lynette’s name:

Four .

Lynette pumped her fist while Eric slumped back in his seat and swore. Everyone around Lynette congratulated her, while Quinn and Art offered sympathetic shoulder pats to Eric. Eric didn’t look thrilled, but he shrugged as if to say, “Eh, what can you do?”

“Well, Eric.” Rich smiled. “We’re sorry to see you go.” He nodded to Kevin and Mark, who went around to stand behind Eric. As they did, Rich said apologetically, “Unfortunately, you have been eliminated from the competition.”

Eric started to get up, but Mark’s hand on his shoulder kept him in his chair. Eric seemed confused, but not particularly alarmed. It was a reality show, after all—they should probably expect the unexpected.

“Do you have anything to say to your fellow participants or to the people watching at home?” Rich asked.

Eric showed his palms and smirked. “Guess I should’ve added another zero to my pledge.”

Laughter rippled around the room.

Rich chuckled almost soundlessly. Then he nodded to the men behind Eric.

Kevin put a hand on Eric’s forehead and yanked it back. A yelp of surprise had barely escaped Geri’s mouth when fluorescent light glinted off metal. Mark’s arm whipped across Eric’s neck, and a split second later, blood poured out from the gaping wound.

In an instant, the room was in chaos. Art and Quinn both lunged in to try to help Eric, but they were both hauled off him. Without Kevin holding him up anymore, Eric slumped forward, gagging and sputtering as he clutched at his neck with both hands. Someone screamed. Someone shouted to help him , for God’s sake.

Geri clamped her hands over her mouth, and she couldn’t tear her gaze away from the grisly scene in front of her. Eric flailed and gasped. He ducked his chin and tried to hold his ruined throat together with his hands, but blood poured between his fingers, pooling on the table and splashing onto the screens. He tried to cry out in obvious pain and terror, but he kept choking and gagging. More blood landed on Art and Quinn and the walls and the ceiling. Eric staggered back, stumbling over his chair before falling to the floor.

She couldn’t see him anymore, but she could still hear his strangled pleas for help as they tapered from cries to moans to wet gasps and gurgles.

As Eric began to go quiet—as his thrashing weakened to writhing—Rich spoke, his voice icier than the hotel’s arctic air conditioning. “This completes the first challenge. We will reconvene first thing in the morning.”

“Reconvene?” Dan Woolman’s voice had gone hollow with horror. “You just murdered a man! We’re—”

“And now you understand the gravity of the game, don’t you?” Rich smiled thinly, his eyes narrow, and the room turned even colder.

“What?” Kyle demanded. “You’re going to—holy shit, you’re going to kill us if we lose?”

Rich fixed that frosty expression on Kyle. “Everyone likes a high stakes game.”

“How the fuck is this a reality show?” Art threw up a hand. “Who the fuck is going to watch a show where—”

“Consider it a reflection of the reality people like you have created,” Rich growled. “One in which the single-minded pursuit of wealth means those who don’t win are left to suffer and die. We’ve just changed the rules so you greedy fuckers can know what it’s like to die because you came in last.” He grinned a bone-chilling grin and looked from one contestant to the next. “And most of the challenges going forward will have punishments that are more...” He quirked his lips as he pretended to search for the right word. “... tailored to the world each loser has created.”

Several people were obviously close to throwing up. At least two already had. Elena clung to her elimination pass like a life preserver. Quinn and Art were both covered in blood, their expressions like too-young soldiers who’d just survived their first firefight while one of their buddies hadn’t been so lucky.

On the floor, Eric still wheezed, the sound wet and painful.

Then, one increasingly labored breath after another, the awful sounds quieted until, finally, he went still and silent.

Everyone exchanged horrified looks.

Geri could see her own thoughts on every one of their faces:

What the hell just happened?

And how the hell do we get out of here?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

For an excruciatingly long moment, the boardroom was silent. Every player at the table was shaking and pale, but their host was relaxed and—of course—grinning. It was as if Rich wanted to give them all a chance to realize that Eric Valentine was dead. That they'd just witnessed his murder—his horrifyingly long and painful death—and they were now locked in a game where their own throats would be cut if they lost a challenge.

Quinn swallowed hard, trying to keep the contents of his stomach where they belonged. He already tasted metal thanks to the blood pooled and splashed beside him; he didn't need to taste vomit on top of it.

More of Eric's blood than he wanted to think about had soaked through his own clothes. It seeped through and stuck to his skin, cold and wet, and if he could've set his clothing on fire in that moment, he would have.

Holy shit. Holy. Shit.

He's dead. His blood is all over me.

And I have no idea how to get out of this place.

Out of this insane fucking game.

Rich looked from one player to the next. "Does anyone have any questions?"

Everyone stared at him, bewildered and shellshocked. Uh, yeah, it was a safe bet they all had some questions.

No one asked, though. Probably because they were all far too aware of the gaping wound across Eric's throat. Or maybe they were all afraid to speak, thinking vomit would come forward instead of words.

Or maybe that was just Quinn.

"No questions?" Rich asked. "Good. Oh, and..." He gestured at the vents above his head. "You may have noticed the room getting a little warmer since you've been here."

Quinn was definitely sweating, and looking around, others were as well. He'd thought it was just because of the situation, but maybe not. Now that Rich had pointed it out, uncomfortable heat had been settling in, making all the cool spots where blood touched Quinn's flesh feel impossibly slimier and more revolting.

Rich's lips peeled back across his teeth. "Don't be alarmed by the warmth. We've shut down the air conditioning. It's bad for the environment, of course, but we also figured it would be a nice preview for what's waiting for all of you in the afterlife." He paused, then shrugged. "Or, well, if you don't believe in an afterlife, it's something to make you duly miserable in what remains of your current life."

The people around the boardroom table exchanged horrified, disbelieving glances.

"This completes the challenge," Rich said. "I'll see you all back here in the morning."

No one moved.

That... That was it?

Or was he waiting to take out the first person to head for the door?

Finally, without another word, Rich straightened his jacket, gestured to his men, and strode out of the room, leaving all the contestants with the carnage. The elevator doors opened, and everyone at the table just listened as the machinery worked.

When everything was silent again, they stared at each other with wide eyes. The silence rang in Quinn's ears, hollow with the absence of Eric's terrible cries and gasps.

"What the fuck do we do now?" Paul asked.

"I have no idea." Charlie sounded dazed. "Even if he legally tricked us into a reality show, this can't be legal. This is..." He trailed off as his eyes lost focus.

"It doesn't matter if it's legal," Alan said. "We're here. And he's..." He gestured at Eric, who was still lying at the floor between Art and Quinn. "He just ordered a man's throat cut. Do you think he gives a shit what's legal? And what are we going to do? Take Price to court?"

There was a murmur of unhappy agreement.

What could they do? They were in the middle of the ocean on a tiny island with no means of escape or—

"Oh, fuck," Quinn said. All heads turned toward him. "I think I just figured out why none of our electronics are working."

Jaws dropped and eyes widened. No one had to say it out loud. It was as easy to see as the blood and the body lying at their feet.

There was no way out.

They were fucked .

Today, Quinn understood what people meant when they talked about showering and scrubbing and not being able to get clean. He'd stripped off his blood-soaked clothes as soon as he'd come stumbling back into his suite, and he'd gone straight into the shower.

This morning, he'd enjoyed a perfectly hot shower with the kind of high pressure that could almost provide a legit deep tissue massage. Now, when he desperately needed it so hot it scalded his skin, it was little more than a lukewarm trickle.

The water swirling at his feet was clear, and the only red on his skin now was where he'd scrubbed until it was irritated, but he kept at it anyway. Kept soaping. Kept rinsing.

Kept seeing that glint of metal just before Eric Valentine's throat turned into a bloody fountain.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself as he let the cool water slide over his face. "Jesus fuck..."

Eventually, he gave up and got out. The mirror had fogged up a little, but not from the shower—from the heat. Without the industrial grade air conditioners blasting, the air was thick and hot, almost as humid as outdoors minus the relief of a gentle breeze.

Hands on either side of the sink, he stared at his hazy reflection as water dripped from his hair.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

He couldn't just roll over and accept his fate. He had to fight back. Try to escape.

Something .

Yeah, that sounded great, but do what? Whittle a canoe out of a palm tree with his teeth? Start fires until there was enough smoke that some distant cargo ship got curious? Just stand on the goddamn beach and scream into the void?

He wiped a hand over his face and swore again.

After a moment, he pushed himself away from the counter and moved into the main part of the suite. He dressed, and then he paced in the small, sweltering room as he tried like hell to conjure up a plan. There had to be a way off this island.

If Geri had seen what she thought she'd seen, then at least some of Rich Price's people were armed. It seemed prudent, then, to err on the side of caution and assume they were all armed. There were also more of them than there were...hostages? Contestants on a fucked-up quasi-game show? Whatever he and the others were, they were outgunned.

The men also had access to vehicles. Even if Quinn got his hands on one of those vehicles, where could he go?

He was a strong swimmer, but he wasn't going to swim hundreds or thousands of miles through ocean currents, and even if he could, he had no idea which way to go. The wrong direction could take him out into the middle of the Atlantic, assuming the sharks didn't get to him first.

Quinn shuddered.

A boat, if he could locate one, would be good. It would get him away from the island and would likely have a radio so he could reach out to...to someone , somewhere.

Which would do him a ton of good if he didn't know where the hell he was.

He dropped onto the edge of the bed and rubbed his stiffening neck. With every idea he came up with that fell apart, his hope faded. There was no escape. None that he could see right now.

And... ugh. He was sweating, and not just from the miserable heat of the room. It was a cold sweat. The kind of sick, shaky sweat that accompanied a fever.

So this is what real, honest to Christ fear feels like.

He shivered, chafing his arms. He needed some air before he suffocated in this room.

He needed to vape. God, yes. That was what he needed. It wouldn't fix a goddamned thing, but it would be something pleasant in this growing shitshow.

The resort was eerily quiet and empty. The hotel had been bustling with people up until yesterday morning when he and the others had been taken to the conference room. Now almost everyone was gone.

There weren't even many employees left—the desk in the lobby was unattended. There was still a bartender and a server in the restaurant, and presumably someone cooking the food in the kitchen. The men who seemed to be Rich's minions were suddenly a more menacing presence, lurking like goons and thugs instead of employees trying to make sure potential investors were duly spoiled.

Quinn crossed the restaurant to the patio. He wasn't at all hungry, and even drinking sounded nauseating. At least the patio was still open; Mark and Tyson loomed at the edges, the holsters on their belts now visible. He supposed there was no point in hiding their handguns now that they had rifles slung across their backs.

Fucking hell. It was like going to an all-inclusive resort, only to find himself a hostage of some local cartel.

Something told him these assholes wouldn't be trying to ransom him, though. His parents were dead anyway, but there were people who could and would cough up money in exchange for his safe release.

After what happened in the boardroom today, though, Quinn didn't imagine a ransom would save him. Rich wasn't looking for money from any of them. Judging by this island and hotel, he wasn't lacking in that department.

No, what he wanted from them couldn't be withdrawn from any account, be it stateside or offshore.

Rich Price was out for blood.

And he wouldn't stop until every last one of them was overdrawn.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

The heat was unbearable. Even now after the sun had gone down, the building remained stuffy and hot.

At least Geri's suite had a balcony. She needed both fresh air and some toxic smoke, so she grabbed her cigarettes and lighter and headed for the sliding glass door.

It was locked.

She flicked the switch up and down, but the lock refused to disengage.

"You can't be serious." She jiggled the handle violently out of pure frustration. Nothing gave. She tried the windows, but they too were locked and refused to budge.

Whispering a string of profanity, she pressed her forehead to the cool, damp glass. She was tempted to light up right there in the suite. What were they going to do? Charge her extra? Shoot her? At this point, she didn't give a fuck.

But the room was already hot and suffocating. As much as she liked smoking, she didn't like the way the smoke could hang in the air and stick to everything. There was also little to no ventilation in here; she couldn't even crack a window to let in fresh air, never mind let out the smoke, so lighting a cigarette would just make things worse.

Fucking hell. Was it too much to ask for some air circulation?

From a group of people who'd murdered a man in cold blood this afternoon... probably, yes.

And when she tried the door, intending to go downstairs... locked.

Jesus Christ.

“I’m going to die here,” she whispered. She didn’t even know if she meant here, as in the overheated suite, or here, as in this island where she’d witnessed a man getting his throat cut.

How the hell do I get out of here? How the hell do I get off this damn island?

Most likely... she didn’t. There wasn’t a speck of land in sight in any direction. One side of the island was sheer cliffs. The beaches—well, she wouldn’t get her far without some kind of boat or aircraft. The marina in front of the hotel was vacant; all the boats had pulled out— all of them—and last she looked, they hadn’t returned.

There had to be some way out, though. If nothing else, Rich Price and his goons had to have the ability to escape if a major hurricane or something descended on the island. Storms like that usually had enough warning that a plane or a boat could be sent to pick people up, but there were still severe weather patterns that could come up out of nowhere. Like the one that had sunk the superyacht packed with wealthy investors. They were out in the open ocean in the middle of hurricane season—anything was possible.

If she could get away from the hotel, maybe she could find whatever craft they had in case of emergency. Even if it was a goddamn inflatable raft or a leaky canoe—something to get her off this godforsaken rock.

Maybe if she got far enough away from the building—even a mile or two up the beach—whatever signal jammers were in the hotel wouldn’t interfere with her equipment anymore. Though the island was tiny, signal jammers only had so much reach. Unless Rich had thought to equip the entire island with them, there had to be

areas where they were weaker or didn't reach at all.

She just needed to get away and put enough distance between her and the hotel to send out an SOS.

Yes. That was what she'd do. Get out of the hotel. Get someplace as remote as the island allowed. Call for help.

First... sleep. Wait for daylight. Try to get a better feel for what little of the island's topography she could see from the hotel's windows. Especially from the boardroom, which seemed to have a 360-degree view.

Okay. Sleep tonight. Tomorrow, make a run for it. Or at least grab whatever opportunity she could to scope out the island. And find an exit from the hotel—if her room and balcony were locked, there was a good chance other doors had been sealed as well.

She put her cigarettes and lighter aside and went through her nighttime routine. As hot as it was, she debated sleeping naked, but the thought turned her stomach; rational or not, that felt just a little too vulnerable and exposed.

Instead, she went with a tank top and a pair of shorts, and after she'd pulled back the covers, she turned off the lights and lay back on the bed. It was too hot to be comfortable, but she would have to make do.

Closing her eyes, she took a few long, slow breaths, willing herself to relax. That was no small task under the circumstances, but she reminded herself over and over that she needed to rest so she could escape. She repeated it like a mantra in her head, trying to will herself to fall—

All at once, the room was bright and full of thundering cracks and booms and

screams.

Geri flew upright, and her heart stopped.

Every wall was lit up with projected videos of warzones. Bombs whistled through the air, then exploded with teeth-vibrating roars or distant thumps. Tracers whizzed across the ceiling like lightning bolts.

The images changed. All around her people screamed and sobbed. On the walls, people were pulling bodies of children from a destroyed school bus. Far away, something exploded, adding panic to the misery.

“What the fuck?” she murmured. “What is happening?”

She had no idea, but she had to get out of here. Right the hell now. She leaped out of bed and ran for the door, not giving a damn about anything except getting out of this room.

The door was still locked.

The deadbolt wouldn't disengage. Just like the sliding glass door, she couldn't get it open.

“Fuck. Fuck! Are you kidding me?” She pounded on the door even though she knew it wouldn't help.

She hurried across the room, grabbed one of the heavy chairs by the table, and threw it hard toward the balcony doors. Hard enough that her back and shoulders ached with the exertion.

It bounced off the glass and landed harmlessly on the floor, one of its arms splintering

on impact. The slider held with just a dull smudge on the glass to commemorate her attempt.

The room offered no other escapes. She had no way out.

“What the hell?” she murmured aloud as she turned in a slow circle in the middle of the room. “What is happening?”

The stark gray-white walls were like TV screens now, every image clear as day and razor sharp. On one wall, footage from a GoPro or bodycam captured panic in the streets. People ran and screamed. The person wearing the camera was panting and shouting in a language she didn’t understand.

All at once, the panic intensified, and seconds later, something exploded. The camera shook and tumbled, then stilled, now pointing up at a smoke-filled sky. It shook in time with what sounded like labored breathing. The wearer’s voice screamed, then sobbed, then whimpered.

Then there was no sound from behind the camera. No movement.

A woman screamed nearby. There were footsteps, and then a bloody face appeared over the camera. The woman wept, and suddenly the camera was covered, her sobs muffled but her anguish coming through unhindered.

The clip ended, and another began. A group of civilians were trying to comfort a man who’d fallen to his knees beside what remained of a small building.

An accusing male voice spoke over the chaos, “This man has just returned home to find his house—along with his wife, children, and parents—no longer exist. The insurgent who was the target of the attack was two towns over and escaped without injury.”

After that, there was battlefield footage in everything from rural to urban settings. Familiar armored vehicles rolled through, crunching over debris and cars as if they weren't there.

The narrator helpfully pointed out the Cole Industries weapons and vehicles in play. How the tanks could take enemy fire, including mortars and grenades, with barely a scratch, and then deploy a bunker buster and take out their attackers and anyone else in the vicinity. He described how her company's drone technology truly was the most accurate on the market, allowing the military to engage and destroy from halfway around the world.

"The CI-994 drone is also the most advanced of its kind," the narrator explained. "Topping out at well over two hundred miles per hour at altitudes in excess of fifty thousand feet. Unfortunately, when a craft that big and fast misses, whether by operator error or mechanical failure, it misses by a lot."

Geri's world was again bombarded with clip after clip of devastation in civilian areas. Homes and farms destroyed. Entire high-rise apartment buildings reduced to what looked like Lego bricks kicked across a child's floor. A fucking school laid to waste .

Geri sank to the floor and just... stared.

The narration wasn't the worst part. It was her own voice coming through the speakers.

"Our goal at Cole Industries is to develop weapons systems that allow our troops to fight effectively while physically remaining miles—even thousands of miles—away from the front lines."

Video clips and still images showed more devastation on an enormous scale. Entire buildings reduced to rubble. Vehicles tossed around like toys or crushed beneath

debris like soda cans. A mother screaming in the street as she held her child's broken body to her chest.

"Weapons like those produced by Cole Industries don't only wreak havoc when they malfunction or are used incorrectly," the narrator said. "They are, by their nature, tools of destruction. And destroy they do."

A clip showed a Cole Industries tank destroying a steel-reinforced bunker in a demo.

After that, an identical tank reduced a building to gravel.

"The four insurgents inside were killed, " the narrator said. "Along with forty-seven civilians."

It went on like that. Image after image. Clip after clip. Damning accusation after damning accusation.

On some level, Geri had known about these things. Collateral damage was a reality of warfare. It always would be.

But "collateral damage" was also a phrase that sounded official and dry instead of encompassing obliterated school buses and annihilated families. It reminded her of the way "pneumonia associated with Guillain-Barré Syndrome" had served as a clinical, unemotional way of explaining why her mother was a widow and the full weight of Cole Industries was now on Geri's shoulders.

War was ugly. War was hell. And war was necessary because a country had to defend itself from—

"Cole Industries continues with its mantra about helping the United States defend itself," the narrator said as if reading her thoughts. "But despite their contracts being

in the name of defense, and with the Department of Defense, their products and political activity support offense and nothing but.”

“That’s...” Geri looked around the room at the walls, which now showed what she thought were clips from Vietnam. “That’s not true.” The Gulf War. Likely Afghanistan and Iraq, especially when Cole Industries equipment was prominently displayed.

“The truth is that American forces have not fought in defense of the United States since World War Two.”

Geri’s lips parted. That was bullshit. That wasn’t—

“American forces have fought for oil. Imperialism. Rare earth metals. Strategic advantage over those who threaten the nation’s superpower status.”

A bomb dropped on the screen in view of a CCTV camera, turning everything white for a split second before the picture cleared, revealing a wasteland where a city block had been.

“American troops and civilians alike have been lied to. Propagandized into believing these wars have been in the name of freedom, democracy, or the nation’s defense.”

Two young American soldiers appeared, shouting for help as they half-carried, half-dragged another man between them. The third man was bloodied and limp, and it took a moment for Geri to realize his bloodstained clothes were camouflage. He was a soldier as well, the other two men shouting over each other for someone to help him.

Men. They were boys. Barely twenty, maybe younger.

“Cole Industries aggressively supports lawmakers who vote in favor of these wars,” the narrator went on. “The defense contractor actively helps people into power who happily perpetuate conflicts that keep bloody taxpayer money rolling into their coffers.”

The soldiers on the screen stumbled. One turned to the man between them, and he panicked, grabbing his friend’s face and calling his name. The other shouted, “Medic! Medic! ”

But it was too late.

One hung his head in defeat. The other pulled his friend close and sobbed, looking younger and younger with each tear that streaked down his dirty face.

“Cole Industries is the grease that keeps the war machine rolling,” the narrator said as the two soldiers cried over their fallen friend. “And that’s exactly how their shareholders like it.”

Geri exhaled and leaned against the bed, still staring at the horrifying images.

They continued. The narrator continued. Hour after hour, as Geri sweltered in the suffocating room, the walls stayed bright with all the death and destruction from Cole Industries.

And Geri didn’t get a moment’s sleep for the rest of the night.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

The rising sun made the images on Quinn's walls and ceiling fade. They were still there, faint light and transparent shadows dancing on every surface, but they were harder to parse now.

Thank God.

Sleep had eluded him. Between the heat and the bright, loud videos projected all over his room, he'd managed a few brief stretches of unconsciousness before he'd snap awake again. Now his head pounded and throbbed as if he were hung over, and he was tired to the point of nausea.

It didn't help that the rising sun brought with it fresh warmth, which only made the room uncomfortably hotter. Growing up in Phoenix, Hawaii, Dubai, and various other places his jet-setting family had lived and traveled, Quinn was no stranger to heat. Inescapable heat, though— that was miserable. In all the places he'd been, there'd always been relief available. Air conditioning. A comfortable breeze. A cool swimming pool. Something .

But the heat and lack of sleep weren't the only reasons he was sick to his stomach.

All night long, he'd been bombarded with horrors he'd never known existed. Seared into his brain beside videos of his father touring construction sites was footage of the deplorable working conditions on those sites. A monotone voice narrated the images, accusing the Hayworth family of everything from worker exploitation to environmental destruction.

He'd had no idea the dark truth behind one of the jewels in the real estate empire's

crown—a sprawling development of homes with seven-figure price tags nestled in Washington state’s Cascade foothills. But there it had been, projected all over the walls of his suite—the aggressive lobbying and palm-greasing to relax environmental protections. The straight-up bribery to pretend they wouldn’t be destroying wildlife habitats and damaging critical waterways.

It was also one of the few developments, he learned, where his father’s company hadn’t recruited as many undocumented immigrants as possible to work for next to nothing. No, this project had been built during a time when Hayworth Development had been applauded for helping the city of Seattle with its massive homeless problem. There’d been news articles and even awards because the company had generously relocated almost two hundred people from the city’s streets to communities of tiny homes built along the I-5 corridor.

“Contrary to the story fed to the public,” the narrator’s voice echoed in Quinn’s throbbing head, “those individuals were temporarily relocated to a site that was a logging camp during the timber industry’s heyday over a century ago. They were later shipped off to other cities— after they’d finished building the seventy-one homes making up the Riverbend Heights neighborhood for far below minimum wage.”

Lying there in his bed, sticky with sweat and hazy with fatigue, Quinn struggled to make sense of it all. He’d thought his father was just a savvy businessman. That he’d taken the reins of his own father’s thriving business and turned it into an empire worth billions.

Quinn wiped a clammy hand over his sweaty face.

His relatives and his late father’s colleagues had loudly criticized him for refusing to take over the business. They’d called him useless and lazy for leaving the company in other hands while he continued enjoying the high-rolling life of a billionaire’s heir.

So why the fuck was he being beat over the head with the sins of his father? He stared up at the ceiling, the remnants of the videos fading as the morning light intensified. Why was he here? He'd neither known about nor participated in his father's pursuit of wealth and power.

Maybe Rich didn't realize how little Quinn had been involved. Maybe he somehow thought Quinn had followed in his father's footsteps.

Maybe this was all a mistake.

An image flashed through his mind of the suited man cutting Eric Valentine's throat in the boardroom. Quinn shuddered as he tried to keep his stomach from rebelling.

Eric was also a product of generational wealth, born of a family who'd created a chain of massive box stores. While Eric could absolutely live it up as the child of billionaires—God knew he and Quinn had crossed paths on the high society party scene—he was also very aggressively involved in his parents' company. He'd been instrumental in getting the stores into over a dozen countries outside North America.

Geri had assumed the position of CEO after her father's death. Kyle Aimes and Kit Mason had taken over their respective companies after their parents had retired. Charlie Simmons and Paul O'Connor had, along with their business partners, built their empires from the ground up.

Quinn hadn't wanted to get involved with his dad's company. Not out of any altruism or some belief that the company was unethical—he just hadn't wanted that life. Either way, he hadn't played any part in the apparently awful practices of Hayworth Development.

Eric hadn't deserved to die, and Quinn didn't think anyone else on this island did either. But if Rich's intent truly was to punish those who made billions on the backs

of others—then why was he here? All he'd done was be born into the Hayworth family. He'd very publicly and conspicuously not taken part in the company.

What the fuck? Why am I here? I haven't done anything!

This had to be a mistake. It had to be. There was no way—

Abruptly, the projections on the walls and ceiling turned off, and a voice barked from the same hidden speakers the narrator's had: "Mr. Hayworth, report to the restaurant in thirty minutes."

His mouth went dry. Shit.

Though... did that mean the doors were unlocked now? He tried the handle, and sure enough, the door swung open. He was no longer trapped in his room.

Still trapped on this fucking island, though.

But maybe not for long? He'd talk to Rich as soon as possible. He could clear up this mistake and get the hell out of this place.

And maybe if he did, he could sound the alarm and let the authorities know what was happening here.

Body aching with fatigue but head buzzing with determination, he rolled to his feet and stumbled into the bathroom. Showering helped. He couldn't get the water hot and he couldn't get any decent pressure, but the lukewarm trickle was both a relief from the oppressive heat and enough of a jolt to wake him up a little.

On the way into the restaurant downstairs, he encountered Kevin, and he pulled him aside. "Hey, um, I'd like to speak to Mr. Price."

Kevin looked bored. “A lot of people would like to speak to him. What makes you think your concerns are his?”

“Uh... Well...” Quinn cleared his throat. “Would you mind telling him? I’m sure he can decide for himself if he wants to speak with me.”

Kevin scowled. “I’ll pass the word along.”

Somehow, Quinn doubted that.

To his surprise, though, an hour later, as all the competitors were filing into the elevator take them up to the boardroom, Rich appeared beside him. He gestured for Quinn to hang back.

Pulse jumping, Quinn stood aside to let everyone else get on the elevator. After the doors had closed, Rich turned to Quinn. “I understand you wanted to speak with me.”

“I—yes, yes, I did.” Quinn cleared his throat. “To cut right to the chase, I... I don’t think I’m supposed to be here.”

The upward flick of a single eyebrow had never been so menacing. An unspoken, “Are you sure you want to tug at this thread, Mr. Hayworth?”

The memory of Eric Valentine’s blood erupting from his throat and between his fingers both terrified Quinn and galvanized him. He knew the man in front of him was more than capable of giving an order to kill someone where they stood. At the same time, if Quinn stayed here any longer, he was going to wind up like Eric. He had to do this, and he had to do it now, or he might as well lie down and give up.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to be here,” he said again. He showed his palms. “Look, you’ve made your point about what my father’s company was involved in. Is

involved in.” Lowering his hands, he shook his head. “But I’ve never had any part in it. I can even show you emails I’ve received from people saying I’m betraying my father’s legacy by refusing to get involved. I...” He gestured around them. “I don’t think I belong here.”

Rich studied him. “So you’ve never played any role in your father’s company.”

“No. Never!” Hope swelled in Quinn’s chest. “It just wasn’t what I wanted to do.”

“I see. What did you want to do?”

Quinn shrugged. “Nothing, honestly. I like investing in startups and stuff—that’s why I accepted the invite to come here—but I just like, you know, traveling and gambling and shit. I don’t want any part of what my dad was doing.” He paused. “Especially not after the stuff I saw last night.”

“What stuff?”

Quinn explained some of the things he’d seen projected all over his walls all night. “I... honestly, I never know about most of that. It’s all just...” He trailed off, unsure how to describe it. “I get how fucked up my family’s business is. But... I haven’t done anything.”

Rich’s expression was impossible to read as he watched Quinn. After a moment, he said, “So you enjoy playing with your family’s wealth. You just want no part of its acquisition.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

The man nodded slowly. “Are you familiar with blood diamonds, Mr. Hayworth?”

Furrowing his brow, Quinn said, “Um. Yes?”

“Right. Right. So you know where the term comes from. All of that.”

Quinn nodded.

“Mmhmm. And if my father owned a company distributing those diamonds—well, the company, since we all know there’s only one —and I lived a lavish lifestyle funded by that company...” He inclined his head. “Wouldn’t you say my lifestyle was paid for by blood diamonds?”

The hope in Quinn’s chest died away, and his stomach flipped. “I, uh...” He swallowed. “I guess it would be, yeah.”

“It would be,” Rich confirmed. “And in that same respect, your life—your entire lavish existence—comes directly from Hayworth Development. For better or worse.” He clapped Quinn’s shoulder hard enough to throw him off-balance. “You say you haven’t done anything, and you’re correct.” He squeezed Quinn’s shoulder painfully. “That’s exactly the problem.”

Quinn gaped, speechless.

Rich gave his shoulder another squeeze. “I assure you, Quinn. You’re not here by accident.” Then he let go, went to the elevator, and pressed the button. When the doors opened, he stepped inside, eyeing Quinn as if to ask, Are you coming?

Quinn didn’t want to be, but what choice did he have? So, he joined Rich in the elevator, and as it climbed the tower toward the boardroom, Quinn’s head spun. He was too exhausted and terrified to pull his thoughts into order. His brain just could not comprehend that he was here, he was in this, and there was no mistake. There was no escape.

One thought did swim to the surface of the maelstrom in his mind, though:

At this point, it didn't matter if Rich was right or wrong in his assessment that Quinn should be here. Quinn was here, and if he didn't want to wind up like Eric Valentine...

He had no choice but to play the fucking game.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

The instant Geri'd stepped off the elevator, before she'd even reached the boardroom, the taste of copper on the air turned her stomach.

The body was gone, at least. The blood? Not so much. It had congealed on the table and Eric's chair, as well as Art and Quinn's chairs. It had stained the wall and the carpet, leaving rust-colored smears here and near-black, coagulated pools there. The dark red splatters on the wall and ceiling remained exactly as they'd been yesterday.

It took work, but Geri managed to avoid throwing up. If anything, the macabre reminder of Eric's murder drove her on; she was going to find a way out of this, and that started with assessing the landscape. Now was the perfect time, too, since Rich hadn't come into the room yet. Neither had Quinn; Geri didn't know what that was about, but she grabbed the opportunity while she had it.

Ostensibly trying to enjoy the view, she strolled up to one of the windows overlooking the western part of the island. The east ended abruptly just beyond the hotel, with sheer cliffs dropping about a hundred feet straight down. Not an ideal escape route for someone who didn't know how to rappel and didn't have a boat waiting for her.

Just north of the building, at the edge of what she could see from this particular window, was the airstrip, which seemed to run right along the water's edge. She couldn't see any aircraft or hangars, but maybe she'd have to sneak a look from another angle across the boardroom.

The western side of the island was more expansive than the east. Pale beaches ringed the coast right up to a dense tree line. The topography wasn't steep or

treacherous—some rolling hills, including a couple of higher ones in the middle of the island. The biggest issue was the thick jungle.

The island was long and narrow, with the northern and southern coasts fully visible while the westernmost end was somewhere beyond the horizon. Good. Even if the island was only twenty or thirty miles long, that meant there was enough distance that she could probably get away from the hotel's signal jammers.

The beach would be easier to traverse, but wildly exposed. The jungle would provide cover, but there was no telling from here if it was passable on foot. And she still didn't know if the venomous snakes existed, or if they were just a deterrent. Either way, the possibility of a snakebite sounded far less dangerous than staying here and waiting to join Eric.

Through the jungle, then, assuming the undergrowth was passable. If it slowed her down too much, she'd have to move on the beach, ideally close to the tree line for some cover. As far away from the building as she could get, she'd try her signal booster again and hope to connect with someone somewhere who could—

The boardroom door opened, and she whipped around.

Rich walked in with Quinn at his heels. Quinn's eyes were downcast and he looked chastised; Geri wondered what had gone on between them before they'd come in here. Whatever it was, it hadn't been good.

Rich still had his gameshow host persona in place, and he gestured at the bloody table. "If everyone could have a seat, please. We can get started."

Everyone exchanged nauseated glances, and then obediently took their seats. Art and Quinn regarded their chairs uneasily before gingerly sitting down.

Rich took his place at the head of the table, though he remained standing. “Before we begin, some of you have approached me and insisted you’re here by mistake.” His gaze landed pointedly on Quinn, then Kit, then Kyle, before he swept it around the table at everyone. “Particularly those of you who’ve inherited your fortunes.”

Geri met Quinn’s eyes across the table. Then he dropped his gaze. Shit. What had Rich said to him before the meeting?

Their host began to pace, one hand behind his back and the other stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Many years ago, I went to school with a boy who was an heir to his family’s fortune. The company that had made his parents rich manufactured a variety of wood-burning stove. Simple enough, right?” He halted and faced the group again. “The problem was that this particular stove was banned by the EPA in the early 1980s. Apparently it leached toxic gases into homes, and it was also a serious source of environmental pollution.”

Geri exchanged puzzled glances with Dan Woolman beside her.

“Not a problem for this boy’s father, though,” Rich said with a sardonic smile. “Because while his product couldn’t be used or sold in the United States, it was quite popular in other countries. Particularly in developing countries that didn’t have stringent environmental or health regulations.”

He rested his hands on the edge of the table and looked at each competitor in turn. “Forty years after his product was banned in the United States, his company is worth over one hundred million. The founder’s net worth, thanks to a number of investments fueled by that wealth, is north of two billion.” He narrowed his eyes. “The cost to the people who consumed his product? Difficult to estimate, but countries in which his stoves are popular have noticeably higher rates of—and fatalities from—several types of lung disease and neurological disorders. The environmental impact?” Rich waved a hand. “Impossible to say for sure, since his

was hardly the only company to take advantage of the more relaxed regulations in those places.” He paused. “What we do know is that countries that have since banned his product have significantly lower levels of carbon dioxide and methane, particularly in rural and residential areas.”

Geri swallowed. Somewhere in her mind, her father’s voice, bellowed, “The damn EPA is costing us a fortune! Why the hell does it matter? Our equipment isn’t even used in the United States!”

She suppressed a shudder. At the time, it had made sense to her. After the horror show she’d been subjected to all night last night... Christ.

Rich wasn’t done yet, either. “My classmate chose not to get involved with his father’s company.” He quirked his lips and shrugged. “He always preferred the life of the leisure class—enjoying all the things the world has to offer the multimillionaire. Now, my classmate never worked a day in his life for his father’s company, but that company subsidized his existence as a decadent parasite. He traveled all over the world, tasted the finer things in life, and had a collection of Swiss timepieces worth as much as his yacht. And every penny of that”—he thumped his knuckle on the table—“came from the wallets of people simply trying to heat their homes, unaware that the cost of that heat was their health. Their children’s health.”

Everyone at the table shifted and squirmed, the creaking chairs giving away their otherwise subtle movements. Geri suddenly thought of her sister, whose only ambitions were to be beautiful, rich, and doted on by a rich husband. She had no interest in working on anything but her tan, and she made no apologies for that.

Is Annette on Rich’s radar?

Unaware of Geri’s heart thumping with renewed fear, Rich said, “My classmate never sold a single stove. He never installed a single one into a single home. But he lived a

life of wealth and privilege built by those stoves.” He narrowed his eyes. “He didn’t actively participate in poisoning people or land, but he turned a blind eye to it and accepted the wealth that came from it. Was he innocent?” Rich shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Then why isn’t he here?” Alan demanded. “Are you just going to torture us because you have an ax to grind with—”

“My classmate is no longer anyone’s concern,” Rich said coolly. “The only question now is whether his heirs will grow up to be parasites like him, or if their humanity will shine through. If they’ll use that ill-gotten wealth to better the world, or if they’ll live in his blissful, spoiled ignorance funded by blood money.” He shrugged so flippantly, it made Geri’s neck prickle. “Nothing to be done there except wait and see.”

“Holy fuck,” Dan said in a harsh whisper. “You’re a serial killer .”

“Technically.” Rich shrugged again. Then he grinned. “I do appreciate the segue into the game’s next challenge, though.”

Oh, that didn’t sound good...

“Now that you all understand what this competition is about,” Rich said, “we’re going to get into the less friendly challenges.”

Geri gulped. Less friendly? Than one where the loser died a slow, agonizing death all over the boardroom floor?

“We like to call this”—Rich clicked the remote, and as he spoke, the words appeared in red on the big screen—“the Body Count Challenge.”

Everyone at the table exchanged puzzled and terrified glances.

“The young people these days are obsessed with the body counts of potential partners,” Rich said. On the screen, a video on the screen flashed through clips of twenty- and thirty-something men and women asking, “What’s your body count?” “What’s your body count?” “What’s your body count?”

Rich paused the video. “Of course, most people lie about it. Some people don’t want to be seen as being too promiscuous. Others want to sound more experienced than they are.” He chuckled in that way people did when they expected everyone in the room to do the same.

Uneasy laughter went around the table.

“To be blunt, I couldn’t give less of a fuck who any of you people have had sex with,” Rich declared. “Unless of course they were underage or otherwise didn’t give consent, in which case—well, karma has a way of catching up with people.”

He scanned the group, possibly searching for uneasy tells.

No one seemed to register on his radar. If they did, he didn’t let on.

“The body count I’m concerned with,” he said after a moment, “is the literal one.” He clicked the remote.

As soon as the image appeared, everyone in the room balked, turning away as they gasped or cursed.

It was a person of indeterminate age or gender in a hospital bed, with tubes and wires sticking out from every imaginable direction. Bags of fluid hung above them, and monitors earnestly recorded vitals that were, even to Geri’s untrained eye, weak.

Bandages and tape covered huge areas of skin. What little skin was visible was almost as pale as the bedsheets.

Rich gestured at the image. “Can any of you guess why this poor individual is in this ICU?”

One by one, contestants shook their heads. Geri could hazard a few guesses—an accident? A serious illness?—but she was terrified to speak up.

“Mr. Keller.” Rich looked right at Art and pointed at the screen. “Is it possible this person overdosed on a medication? Or perhaps was unable to acquire the medication he needed because it was too expensive?”

Art gulped. “It... I... I suppose, yes?”

“Mmhmm.” Rich’s eyes flicked to Kit. “Ms. Mason. Is there a chance this could be pesticide exposure? Perhaps chemical burns? Cancer?”

Kit lost some color. “M-maybe?”

“Maybe indeed. Or...” Rich stroked his chin as if giving it some serious thought. He shifted his gaze to Dan Woolman. “A worker in a mine who’s inhaled too many particles of coal.” He looked at Geri. “A civilian wounded in a drone strike.” He moved on to Lynette. “Any of the above, thanks to political lobbying to prevent costly but effective regulations that would prevent such tragedies.”

Geri’s heart thundered in her chest. A chair squeaked as someone else fidgeted. She thought she heard someone whisper a prayer. Under any other circumstances, she’d have rolled her eyes at Rich’s self-righteous preaching. Today, she could still taste Eric Valentine’s blood with every breath, and she was too scared to be annoyed.

And admittedly, she saw his points. All of them.

“I’m not going to tell you what happened to this person,” Rich said. “Only that he died at the age of forty-five, leaving behind a wife and three kids who will never be able to pay for the multimillion dollar bill from his hospital stay.”

“Let us pay for it,” Charlie blurted out. “Any one of us can. Easily.”

“You can, yes.” Rich glared at him. “It’s pocket change for a man worth what you are. And yet, how many of you have ever eagerly volunteered to cover such a bill when your neck wasn’t on the line?”

No one responded. What could they say?

Geri pressed back in her chair, a mix of fear and shame knotting beneath her ribs.

“At any time,” Rich gritted out, “any one of you could have spent a few hours—hell, twenty minutes—scrolling a site like GoFundMe. You could have changed the lives of thousands of people with a few clicks.” He paused, scanning the contestants. “I’ll tell you what—if you can prove that you’ve done exactly that, you can leave.” He gestured at the door. “I’ll have a plane ready on the airstrip to take you off the island and back to your home. All you have to do is show me proof that you’ve fulfilled more than five GoFundMes.” He raised his chin. “Any takers?”

“You won’t—” Paul hesitated, then with a mix of both timidity and defiance, he croaked, “You won’t just let us leave. Not after we watched you murder someone.”

“On the contrary.” Rich offered a frosty grin. “I’m just that confident that not one among you can claim this particular ticket off the island.” He looked from one person to the next again. “Or am I wrong?”

No one spoke up.

Rich gave a caustic laugh. “That’s what I thought. Now. For this challenge, I once again need a number from each of you. This time...” He grinned again. “I want your body count.”

The players exchanged puzzled glances before turning to him again.

Rich said, “Every one of you built your fortune on the backs of thousands if not millions of people. Every one of your bank balances is written in blood. The very least you could do is be aware of how many people contributed to that blood.” He paused. “And I would suggest you be honest in your assessments, because whoever’s guess is the farthest from reality, well.” He gestured at the vacant, bloody chair between Art and Quinn. “I don’t think I need to spell out what happens.”

The panic in the room was quiet but palpable, as if Geri could physically feel every person’s pulse skyrocketing as adrenaline shot through them.

“How can we even know what our...” Dan made a horrified face. “What our body count is?”

Rich looked him right in the eyes. “How can you continue to rake in money while turning a blind eye to how many lives are lost as a result?”

Dan blanched and gulped.

“By the time we’re finished here,” Rich growled, “you’ll all have a much better idea of the impact your companies—or your parents’ companies—have on the rest of the world.” Before anyone could protest, he gestured at Art. “Mr. Keller. Why don’t you go first?”

Art gaped. “I... Me?”

“Yes. You.”

The pharmaceutical tycoon’s eyes lost focus. The whole room was silent as he seemed to consider his answer. After several painful minutes had gone by, he offered up his guess, which was in the low five figures.

“I wanted the total body count,” Rich said coldly. “Not annual.”

Art stared at him, jaw slack. “That’s—my company is not murdering people. Are you insane?”

Rich shrugged. “Overdoses alone account for a few thousand per year, and—”

“My company is not responsible for people using our products incorrectly,” Art snapped.

Rich narrowed his eyes. “You are when you lobby against programs to prevent opioid addiction in between sending your representatives to doctors’ offices to push your products.”

Art paled.

“Similarly,” Rich said, “you are responsible when you buy the silence of families whose loved ones died as a result of reactions and interactions, and you keep that data quiet so it won’t damage sales.” He clicked the remote. “All told, Mr. Keller, you’ve undersold your company’s body count by forty-six percent.”

“What? How do we even know these numbers are accurate?” Art demanded. “Where are your sources? Prove it! I demand proof! ”

Rich shrugged. He went to a keyboard beside the large screen and tapped a few keys. When he was finished, dozens of PDFs were listed. He selected one at random and showed the results of an investigation into deaths as a result of being unable to afford medications.

Art scoffed. “Their insurance companies are the ones who deny them! Not us!”

Rich narrowed his eyes. “Are their insurance companies the ones who decide a particular chemo drug is twenty thousand dollars per pill?”

Art’s mouth opened and closed like a fish’s.

“Do insurance companies decide that emergency inhalers and epinephrin should be astronomically expensive?”

Art shifted in his chair. Then he looked around, and his spine straightened. “Why aren’t there any insurance executives here, though? Because we all know they stand in the way of more healthcare than—”

“Oh, I promise you,” Rich said evenly, “we haven’t forgotten about them. But today, the one in the hot seat is you.” He gestured at the screen again. “And your company—your greed—is the reason people die for want of medications to treat cancer, asthma, diabetes, anaphylaxis. The list goes on.” He leaned a hand on the table and glared harder at Art. “Your company manufactures a drug that treats liver cancer in children, and it costs patients over one million dollars per year. You can’t blame insurers for that, you absolute human piece of shit.”

Art stared at him, eyes huge and skin blanched.

“And let’s not also forget the mountains of pharmaceuticals that were not approved by the FDA, but your company continues to produce and sell.” Rich narrowed his

eyes. “Would you like to tell the class”—he gestured at everyone else—“why you would continue to produce something you can’t sell?”

Art swallowed hard. “They’re... They’re sold in places with—”

“Speak up!” Rich barked.

Art jumped, then spoke a little louder. “They’re sold in places without as many regulations as the United States.”

“They are. And there are reams of data”—Rich flicked through several PDFs on the screen—“about people suffering and dying from your drugs for all the reasons the FDA refused to approve them. I have the proof of all that and more.” Rich pointed at the screen. “Your company is responsible for tens of thousands of deaths, and I will happily walk everyone in this room through every single document detailing how and why that blood is on your hands. Would you like me to continue?”

Mute, Art shook his head.

“That’s what I thought. Moving on.”

Quinn’s family had made a fortune in real estate. Geri hadn’t thought there would be many deaths associated with that, but clearly she was wrong. Fortunately for Quinn, he hadn’t made that assumption; he’d guessed around a thousand, and Rich’s statistics said a little over twelve hundred. Most of those had been construction deaths over the years, but also suicides of underpaid employees as well as poverty, a lack of healthcare, and even a murder-suicide.

“Your father made sure one of his employees was screwed out of a workers’ comp claim,” Rich explained. “The employee was too disabled to work, and too poor to survive while he went through the system to get approved for disability. When he

realized he couldn't dig himself out of that hole, he shot his wife and kids, then himself."

The story made Geri ill. From the shaking hand Quinn put over his mouth as his face turned green, he was long past that point.

The only relief, she suspected, was that he'd guessed close enough to remain ahead of Art and out of danger of elimination.

Charlie and Elena Simmons acquired their fortune came from the same place, so Rich had them both input their guesses before he revealed the real number. They both grossly underestimated their body count, with Charlie guessing substantially closer than his ex-wife. Elena had apparently been unaware that Charlie's high tech empire included supply chains that went back to lithium and other rare earth mines, sweatshops, and child slave labor, all of which had resulted in deaths. They had both at least been aware that a few of the company's stateside employees had been forced to work until they collapsed from dehydration or heat exhaustion, and several had died. A shameful number of employees been fired for missing too much work, resulting in them losing access to their health insurance, and they'd died of the cancer or other serious illness that had been the cause of their absences.

When employee suicides were addressed, Charlie barked, "I can't be held responsible for workers who have problems outside of work!"

In response, Rich had calmly shown everyone in the room scans of suicide notes from those employees, each of which pointed to their job as destroying health, relationships, and sanity.

"Any questions?" Rich asked.

Both Charlie and Elena shook their heads.

“Elena,” Rich said, “you’re currently in last place. Would you like to use your elimination pass?”

Elena chewed her lip so hard it nearly bled. “Do I have to make the choice now?”

“No. You can wait.”

“I’ll wait.” She wrung her hands in her lap. “There’s... There’s still people left to go.”

Next was Geri. After watching everyone before her underestimate, she tried to strategize in the opposite direction. Adding up the numbers she was familiar with regarding drone strikes, ordnance deployments, and overall casualties in various conflicts over the years, and taking into consideration that Cole Industries wasn’t the only game in town, she guessed around a hundred thousand.

“I’ll give you credit,” Rich said flatly, “You at least acknowledge the destruction your company creates. But you’ve still come up short.”

Her blood turned cold. “How... How short?”

Like he had for Art, Rich pulled up a folder of PDFs, and Geri’s heart sank deeper with each statistic he dropped.

Failures of armor and weapon systems due to design decisions made to keep costs down. Depleted uranium exposure. Extreme poverty due to destroyed infrastructure. Contaminated water and food supplies. Civilian encounters with unexploded ordnance.

And she wasn’t exempt from supply line casualties either. Mining. Processing of raw materials. Horrific working conditions in countries where Cole Industries sought

cheap labor.

She'd always known the company manufactured equipment to kill enemies and keep allies alive, and that collateral damage was part of that. But all that death carried more weight now than she'd ever imagined. As if each person's blood was on her hands. Now that blood and her ignorance about just how much destruction she'd caused might be her own literal death.

Her heart was in the pit of her churning stomach. She was in position to be eliminated, and there were only a few people left. Her neck prickled as if she could feel Death's breath right on her sweat-dampened skin.

She caught Quinn's eye across the table. He was clearly relieved to be off the chopping block, but there was concern in his expression. She wondered if he could see how terrified she was.

By the time Rich had made it all the way around the table and reached the final contestant, Geri was still in last place. The despair kicked in hard—there was no way she, head of a defense contractor and weapons manufacturer, would win over a political lobbyist. No way.

She closed her eyes and covered her face. She had never shaken this badly before. Not when she'd been on a boat during a hurricane. Not when she'd been given the news that her father's longtime illness had taken a sharp downward turn. The icy terror was cemented to her bones by inevitability—she was going to die. Here and now. In this room. There was no way around it.

Sure enough, Lynette's guess was in the low thousands, and Geri's heart sank even deeper. Lynette had probably overshot the real number, which meant Geri was fucked.

“My, my, Ms. Baldwin,” Rich said mildly. “You’re quite the saint compared to your fellow competitors.”

Lynette smiled with relief, but then the smile dropped. She squirmed in her chair.

Geri glanced between her and Rich. Did Lynette know something? Or was she just getting as paranoid as they all were because Rich might have some horrific card up his sleeve?

“By sheer numbers,” Rich said, “Geri Cole would be eliminated here and now.”

Geri swallowed, still terrified but possibly seeing a glimmer of hope.

“This game isn’t about the sheer numbers, though,” Rich went on. “It’s about how honest and aware you all are about those numbers. And Ms. Baldwin...” Rich tsked and shook his head. “It seems you might be the most oblivious of all.”

All the air rushed out of Geri’s lungs at the same moment Lynette sucked in a startled breath.

“What?” Lynette put a hand to her chest. “What do you mean? I don’t poison or murder people! My guess was much higher than it should’ve been!”

“Au contraire, my dear.” Rich shook his head again. “Your inheritance alone was built in blood.”

She scoffed. “That all came before me! I’m not responsible for it!”

“No, and we’re not counting it here. But what you’ve chosen to do with your gilded life— that is on you. And for reasons you can take up with the deity of your choosing, you chose to lobby for multiple companies who wanted fewer regulations

and more freedom to get rich.”

“I’m just a liaison!” she insisted, shifting in her chair as she became more agitated.

“All I do is—”

“All you do is grease the palms of people in power,” Rich growled. “At the behest of companies including Ms. Cole’s, Mr. Woolman’s, and Mr. Keller’s.” He inclined his head. “And you don’t believe some of the blood on their hands is also on yours?”

Lynette argued fiercely, gesturing at some of the other competitors as if trying to implicate them, but Geri couldn’t make out the words over the blood pounding in her ears. She was guiltily relieved that she wouldn’t be the one losing this challenge after all, but someone else was going to die in her place. And that someone else, it turned out, had been hired by Cole Industries to lobby on their behalf.

She was beginning to think Rich’s lethal punishments wouldn’t do nearly as much damage to her as her conscience being ripped apart.

Rich leaned down and reached under the table. When he rose, everyone stilled.

He had a pistol in his hand, along with a magazine. He opened his other hand and let a few bullets scatter on the glass tabletop, their rattling and rolling making Geri’s teeth try to chatter.

As everyone watched in petrified silence, Rich began to thumb rounds into the magazine. “One of your crown jewels, Ms. Baldwin, is successfully bribing lawmakers to—if you’ll pardon the pun—shoot down several gun control measures.” He snapped the magazine into the pistol and racked the slide. “Tell me, Ms. Baldwin.” He clicked off the safety and looked right at her. “Are you proud of your work?”

Lynette stared at him and the gun.

“It’s a simple question.” He tilted his head. “Are you proud that you’ve been knowingly making your country less safe?” He tapped the muzzle of the gun against the table, the rhythmic clink of metal on glass menacing and unnerving. “Or do you have some capacity to feel shame?”

“I...” Lynette’s eyes flicked toward the gun, and she pressed her lips together. Finally, she met his gaze again with a mix of fear and defiance. “I work to keep people and companies free instead of—”

Rich shot her.

The blast sent everyone at the table scurrying backward, some toppling chairs as they went.

Lynette slumped over the edge of the table, hands on her midsection, still alive and in agony as blood ran between her fingers. She didn’t make a sound, though.

Except... no.

It wasn’t that she wasn’t making any sounds—it was that Geri couldn’t hear anything. Her ears were stuffed with cotton, and only a high-pitched ringing made it through.

Lynette crumpled to the side, then onto the floor, both her and her chair sprawling. Kit and Charlie were closest to her, and they stared in slack-jawed horror as she writhed and bled on the carpet at their feet.

Her screams made it through the cotton in Geri’s ears, and as some of that cotton cleared away, the agonizing sounds made her stomach turn.

At the head of the table, Rich huffed in annoyance and gestured at Tyson. “Shut her up.”

Tyson nodded sharply.

Geri didn’t feel guilty about her relief this time; they were going to put the poor woman out of her misery.

That was what she thought they were going to do, anyway.

Tyson pulled a rag out of his pocket and jammed it into Lynette’s mouth. Indeed, he shut the woman up, reducing her cries to muffled moans that sounded a lot like they had while Geri’s ears had still been offline. In that moment, she was glad her hearing hadn’t fully recovered yet.

Rich kept talking, but Geri didn’t understand a word he said. She needed to know because this game was quite literally life or death, but all she could hear were the steadily fading sounds of life coming from Lynette.

At some point, the poor woman fell silent. Kit and Charlie still glanced at her now and then, while Rich kept talking, their faces turning greener each time, but she didn’t make another sound. Unconscious, probably. Dead, hopefully.

That could’ve been me.

That almost was me.

I lived... and she died. Horribly.

Geri rubbed her temples and tried not to throw up. She didn’t know how to feel any of this. The guilt. The shameful relief. The fear that she wouldn’t be able to dodge the

bullet—the literal or metaphorical one—next time.

“Well done, competitors.” Rich produced another one of those unsettling grins. “This completes the Body Count challenge. Now, if you would all return to your rooms, change into some casual clothing, and meet back in the lobby in one hour.”

Geri swallowed bile.

Oh fuck. What fresh hell is this?

“And what if we don’t come down?” Charlie Simmons demanded. “You’re going to kill us anyway, so why should we—”

“Mr. Simmons.” Rich gestured at Lynette. “Rest assured that there are far worse ways to die than this. And don’t think for a second that I’m above using those methods on someone who pisses me off.” He pointed at the door. “Lobby. One hour.”

Charlie’s teeth snapped shut.

And he followed everyone else out of the boardroom.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

An hour after they'd left the boardroom, with the smell of Lynette Baldwin's blood still metallic in his nostrils and on his tongue, Quinn joined everyone else in the lobby.

Everyone looked ready to throw up. Quinn thought Kit and Charlie already had. At the edge of the small crowd, Geri was hugging herself, gaze distant and face still pale. She was shivering, too.

He approached cautiously. "Hey. You all right?"

She nodded, not making eye contact with him, and she seemed to be struggling to keep her teeth from chattering. "Y-yeah. Thought it was going to be me. Lynette, I mean. I thought..." She chafed her arms as if she were cold despite the relentless heat. "Oh my God. He's going to kill all of us."

Quinn couldn't even argue. Two of their fellow competitors were already dead. Just... slaughtered, right in front of everyone, brutally and without apology. He looked from one horrified face to the next. Was Geri right? Was Rich going to take them out, one after the other, in some gruesome ways Quinn didn't want to think about?

Now Quinn was the one shivering. Fuck.

Tyson and Mark appeared in the lobby with several blank-faced and well-armed men.

"Come with us," Tyson barked. "Now. "

“Sir, yes, sir,” a sarcastic voice in Quinn’s mind retorted. But he was too scared to say anything out loud, so he just silently followed everyone else outside.

They were led out of the hotel, past the empty marina, and along the beach to a stretch of sand that had been cordoned off with flags. Some shovels were leaned against a boulder. Two tall lifeguard chairs loomed over the scene, occupied by a pair of lifeguards... with black rifles laid across their laps.

And of course, there he was—Rich goddamned Price.

“Welcome, competitors.” Their host smiled, and he spoke with the manic cheer of an actual reality show host, grinning as if he were detailing the rules of a quirky, funny challenge. “One of the many, many reasons you’re all here is that every one of you—every last one—has the exploitation of the working class to thank for your obscene amounts of wealth. Back-breaking labor in inhospitable conditions with the absolute bare minimum in compensation—sound familiar?”

“My workers have good pay and benefits!” Charlie insisted. “They’re unionized!”

“After how many attempts by your company to stop them from unionizing?” Rich looked at him in disgust. “Fuck off.”

Charlie gaped, and it was probably that more than anything else—more than the two grisly murders in the boardroom—that let him know he was out of his element now. He wasn’t in control anymore. None of them were.

No one except Rich Price.

“For the next”—Rich made a showy gesture of pulling back his sleeve to check his gleaming gold watch—“nine hours, you’re all going to get a taste of the labor that elevated you to where you are.” He lowered his hands, folding them in front of him,

and that game show host smile stayed firmly in place. “Mark will take things from here. Enjoy.”

And with that, he walked away.

Mark stepped in front of the small crowd. “All right. Let’s get to work. Your task is to move sand from there”—he gestured at one end of the flagged area—“to there.” He pointed at another area surrounded by blue flags about fifty feet away.

“That’s... that’s our job?” Kit asked. “Just move sand around? Why?”

Mark’s sunglasses hid his eyes, but his glare was still impossible to miss. “Because that’s the task you’ve been assigned.” He took a shovel from the pile and tossed it at her. She sort of caught it, but fumbled it, and it dropped to the sand at her feet. Sheepishly, she picked it up, and she held it as if she had no idea what to do with it.

“You’ll get a fifteen-minute break after two hours, and a thirty-minute lunch after four.” Mark waved sharply. “Grab a shovel and start digging.”

What else could they do? Especially with Tyson, Mark, and the two “lifeguards” standing by with weapons.

So... they grabbed shovels and started digging.

Two hours between starting and taking a break didn’t sound like much, but those were two of the longest hours of Quinn’s life. Back and forth, shovelful after shovelful, he slogged with the rest of the group. No one complained out loud; he figured they were also kept silent by the black rifles in their peripheral vision.

On their break, they were handed warm bottles of water. It was probably some kind of off-brand water that had been treated to hell and back and had been sitting long

enough for the plastic to leech into it. It had that flat, awful taste he'd encountered a few times.

After shoveling sand for two hours, he drank it happily.

Beside him, Dan Woolman gazed out at the half-dug beach. "I read about something like this once."

Quinn turned to him. "Yeah?"

Dan nodded, gaze distant. "Yeah." He met Quinn's eyes. "In a book about the camps in Germany."

Quinn's heart skipped. "Seriously?"

Dan nodded. "The Nazis—they'd make prisoners just... move sand from one side of the camp to the other. And then move it back. Hard labor, they called it." He brought his water bottle up to his lips and added, "At least they're not making us wear wooden shoes."

Quinn glanced down at his sneakers. They were uncomfortable enough, and he was sure he'd have blisters by the end of the day thanks to the grains of sand that had worked their way inside. Wooden shoes? In sand? That would be unbearable.

Most of the task was unbearable anyway. At the end of their fifteen-minute break, they were ordered back to work.

The tide began inching up the beach, lapping at the feet of the competitors closest to its edge. Soon, it was up to their ankles. The cool water was a relief, but a short-lived one. There wasn't enough yet to saturate the sand and turn it into a packed, firm surface; it was just loose mud now, which was even harder to walk in than dry sand.

Quinn's knees and hips ached from pulling his feet out of the mud with every step and trying to stay balanced on the uneven ground. The task didn't seem like much, but holy shit, it was taxing after a while, especially as the ground got wetter and looser and harder to traverse.

Lunch was thirty minutes of sitting in the shade eating stale sandwiches with warm water. The shade was still hot, but it was a relief from the high-noon sun. Quinn's skin already had that crispy feeling that suggested that in a few hours, he'd be thanking the gods he'd remembered to pack some aloe vera. Especially since something told him their "hosts" wouldn't be distributing anything to help with sunburns.

While the group was eating, Kit asked, "Did anyone else—last night..." She shuddered. "All over the walls in my room, it was just horrifying."

Somber nods went around the group.

"It was awful," Alan said. "Fucking horror movie all night long on full blast."

"I never knew my dad's company did all that shit," Quinn admitted.

There were a few sheepish nods. A few people who wouldn't meet anyone else's eyes.

Did they know? Had they seen things last night that they'd known about all along?

He didn't ask. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Thank God I had something to take last night," Art said. "Or I never would've slept."

All eyes were on him, and everyone leaned closer.

“You took something?” Kit asked. “Do you, uh... Do you have more?”

Art sat back a little, eyeing the group warily. “I... I do, yes. I don’t know that I have enough for... I mean, who knows how long we’re going to be here?”

“So you can sleep while the rest of us suffer?” Charlie snapped. “If you’ve got something that can help us all...” He gestured at the group.

Art looked from one person to the next, drawing back even more. “I... But I...”

“You’d better fucking share it,” Dan growled. “Or we’ll all just take it from you.”

Art’s eyes went huge. He drew back a little. “There’s... There’s no need for—”

“You’re the only one here with any kind of relief,” Paul gritted out. “You hoard that shit, and you’ll regret it.”

“Okay. Okay!” Art put up his hands. “Okay, I’ll—” He exhaled, dropped his gaze, and brought up his sandwich for a bite. “I’ll have to get them from my room. But...” He nodded. “I can give everyone some. We’ll just have to ration them. Because God knows how long they’ll have to last.”

The response to that was somber nods and lowered hackles.

Quinn’s mouth watered—or, well, tried to; he was too dehydrated—at the prospect of something that would knock him out tonight.

“All right, contestants,” Mark called out. “Back to work.”

Fucking hell. Quinn pushed himself to his feet, body aching and skin burning, and he did as he was told.

He was in reasonably good physical condition, and he still struggled. Between the heat, the sun beating on his back, the sand chewing at his feet, and the exhaustion from a sleepless night, every step was awful. His mouth was parched. His vision tried to go dark a few times. He desperately needed water, shade, cool air—but every time he slowed down, he was met with a bark of, “Keep moving!” and “That sand isn’t going to shovel itself!”

He kept moving. He kept shoveling. He kept wondering how he hadn’t already dropped to his knees or faceplanted.

Others in the group were far worse off than he was. Art collapsed twice before their second break. Their keepers actually took pity on him and let him sit in the shade for half an hour with some water before putting him back to work. At one point, Dan threw up in the sand. Their overseers just had him shovel the contaminated sand into the same pile as the rest. He was seriously wobbly after that, and he took a knee a few times, but he kept going.

Kit ended up sitting out for thirty minutes like Art had. She’d collapsed once, then passed out completely. Two of the armed men had carried her into the shade, and once she was more or less steady and had drunk some water, they put her back to work. Art, Dan, and Kit were all far slower than everyone else, but they slogged on.

After what seemed like dozens of hellish, grueling hours had passed since their second break, someone blew a whistle, and Quinn almost dropped his shovel. He very nearly faceplanted in the sand from sheer relief.

It was over. Thank Christ, it was over.

“Dinner will be served in the restaurant.” Mark gestured toward the hotel. “I’ll see everyone in the lobby at 8:00 tomorrow morning.”

God. Tomorrow. There’d be more tomorrow. More of what, Quinn didn’t know, but it wouldn’t be good.

Everyone started toward the hotel.

They didn’t make it far.

“Wait.”

The group halted.

“You three.” Mark pointed at Art, Dan, and Kit. “You still have time to make up.”

Their jaws went slack. Dan grabbed on to Paul just to keep from sinking to the sand.

“You all owe the clock thirty minutes.” Mark gestured at the piles. “Back to work.”

The three stared in disbelief.

“Back to work!” he barked.

That got them moving. They staggered toward the shovels. Each picked one up and stumbled toward the dug-up sand.

Mark glared at the rest of the group. “You want to join them?”

Instantly, they all started up the path.

Quinn felt bad for the three they were leaving behind, but he wasn't about to volunteer for more. One more shovelful of sand, and he'd be on the ground. He just fucking knew it.

His legs were shaking badly, making the trek up to the hotel a long and miserable one. Good thing no one had deactivated the elevator along with the air conditioning and hot water.

Though... he didn't mention that out loud.

No need to give anyone ideas.

After a cold shower (which had felt amazing on his burned skin), Quinn headed downstairs. He would've been happy to escape his stuffy room by going out on the balcony, but since the doors were locked, that wasn't an option anymore.

His legs were still unsteady as he limped downstairs to the bar. Mercifully, the restaurant was open, as were the patio doors. As hot as it was both inside and out, the cross breeze made the room moderately bearable.

Almost everyone sat at tables, eating in miserable silence. The food was cold and congealed, like leftovers of the more decadent meals they'd been served when they'd first arrived. Still, Quinn didn't complain. He was starving, and there wasn't much he wouldn't have eaten in that moment.

He was honestly surprised there wasn't any bitching about the food or, well, anything. People in this cutthroat social strata didn't take kindly to being cornered, threatened, or mistreated. Then again, their situation had turned quite literally cutthroat after the first challenge, so... fuck. Maybe everyone was too scared and too traumatized to complain. For Quinn's part, he had to admit the lifeless, slimy food was a pleasant switch from tasting blood or sand.

At one point, Art came by Quinn's table. He had, true to his word, brought some pills down, and he slipped four of them to Quinn.

"I'd give you more," the man said, "but I only have so many."

Quinn nodded. "What are they?"

"It's a sleep aid." Art paused, then lowered his voice a little more. "I've got pain pills too. They'll do the same thing, but we've got to be careful with those."

"So no one ODs?"

"Well, and so no one gets hooked on them. I don't know about you, but I don't think this"—he gestured at their surroundings—"will get any better if we've got someone addicted to pills we can't get anymore."

Quinn grimaced. He knew several people who'd fallen into opioid addiction, and he could only imagine how much something like that would add to the shitstorm they were in right now. Everyone was miserable enough without someone jonesing for pills that were an ocean away.

As he put the pills in his pocket, his shoulder ached with the simple movement. "Maybe keep the painkillers handy for actual pain," he muttered. "I think we're going to need them."

Art grunted and didn't gainsay him.

After his meal, Quinn wasn't at all surprised to find Geri smoking a cigarette out on the patio. Her dark hair was pulled back in a loose, damp ponytail, and her tank top sat on pale shoulders that contrasted sharply with her burned neck and arms. Her nose and cheeks were deep pink and puffy. She had dark circles under her eyes, just like

everyone in the group had, and they looked even darker with the sunburn.

Gaze distant, she smoked shakily, the epitome of how miserable and beaten down Quinn felt.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Not at all.”

For a while, they smoked the way everyone had eaten—in silence. As she was getting toward the end of her cigarette, though, she said, “There has to be a way out of this.”

“I’ve been trying to think of one,” he said. “I’ve got nothing.”

Geri pressed her lips together. Then, “I think we should talk to Rich.” She brought her cigarette to her lips and spoke around it. “I want to take him up on the golden ticket.”

“Wasn’t that a one-time deal?”

She nodded slowly and met his gaze, her eyes full of exhaustion. “Worth a try, isn’t it?” She offered a heavy, tired half-shrug. “Do we really have anything to lose?”

Fuck. That was a depressing thought.

“I guess we don’t,” he rasped. “Christ.”

Geri crushed her cigarette under her heel, then picked up the butt and dropped it in an ashtray. “Let’s go. I doubt he’s in his office right now, but... I don’t know. Maybe we can schedule something.”

“One can hope,” he muttered, and he followed her in from the patio.

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Geri and Quinn told Mark they wished to speak with Rich. Apparently Kevin had given Quinn some grief over wanting a one-on-one with the big man, but Mark just told them he'd let Rich know. An hour later, as they were drinking in the restaurant, he told them to come with him.

Neither dared suggest they finish their drinks first. Something told Geri that they were doing this on Rich's time or not at all.

Mark herded them into the elevator that went up to the boardroom, but he stopped it at the floor just below the familiar one. He took them to a closed door, knocked once, and ordered them inside.

As nervous as she was to face Rich in his office, there was some serious relief in here—air conditioning. Especially compared to the rest of the hotel, the room was downright arctic.

“Ms. Cole. Mr. Hayworth.” Rich leaned back in his desk chair and gestured at the seats in front of his desk. “Sit down. I understand you want to speak with me.”

As they took their seats, Geri said, “Yes. We do.” She and Quinn looked at each other.

Then Quinn spoke. “To put it bluntly, you’ve made your point. We both”—he gestured at Geri, then himself—“didn’t understand how much damage our families and our companies did to get us the wealth we have.”

Geri nodded. “There’s no excuse for it. We didn’t know, but we do now. And we

both want the opportunity to make some of that right.”

Rich studied them both for an uncomfortably long moment. “Well, I’ll give you both credit. You seem to have absorbed my message more quickly than most of your ilk. You seem to understand the damage done in the name of the wealth you now possess.”

“We do,” Quinn croaked. “Very much so.”

Geri nodded. “You’ve, um... You’ve definitely made your point.”

“I’m sure,” Rich said. “And I’m not at all surprised that out of the twelve people I picked for this game, it’s the two of you sitting in here telling me this.”

“How do you mean?” Quinn asked.

Rich folded his hands in his lap. “Some of the others in the boardroom probably won’t come to the same conclusions you two have. I’ve long believed it takes a psychopath to be a billionaire, because only a billionaire could hoard so much wealth while so much suffering goes on around them. Especially when that wealth came from the suffering of others.” He half-shrugged. “So I’ll commend the two of you for possessing enough humanity to finally recognize what you have.”

“I’m ashamed that I didn’t know before,” Quinn said. “I should have. But...” He sighed, shaking his head.

“You have the capacity for it,” Rich acknowledged. “That’s more than some of the other people in your social class can say.”

Hope swelled in Geri along with some cautious preemptive relief. He believed them that they’d seen the light. Thank God.

“Heirs like the two of you can go either way in that respect,” Rich went on. “Realizing their part in the destruction versus willfully turning a blind eye or not believing they’re responsible for it. They’re born into a gilded life. They don’t make the destructive decisions that fill their bank accounts.” He rocked his head from side to side. “Some follow right in their parents’ footsteps. The entitled apple doesn’t fall far from the rotting tree, after all. They’re incapable and unwilling to conjure up the empathy or the perspective to see—or care—how much people suffer so they can be wealthy.”

Geri’s face burned and she stared down at her hands.

Rich wasn’t done. “But others, especially those whose parents encourage them to get educated and travel, can often stay more grounded. More in touch with their humanity. And when they realize where their family’s wealth comes from, they try to balance the scales. Maybe they don’t give away the wealth and destroy the business, but they try to do good. Humanitarian projects. Activism.” He shrugged. “Things that can hopefully tilt the karmic scales in their favor.”

Geri shifted in her chair. “I won’t lie—I feel terrible for being in that first category. But now that you’ve shown me...” She swallowed hard.

“Me too,” Quinn said softly. “This has been, um... eye-opening.”

“I’m sure it has.” Rich inclined his head. “Which is why you’re in here to ask if you can still claim the golden ticket.”

Geri tensed. Beside her, Quinn straightened so fast his chair squeaked.

“How, um...” She shook herself. “How did you know?”

Rich laughed almost soundlessly. “This isn’t my first rodeo, Ms. Cole. And people

are surprisingly predictable when facing the things I'm making you all face."

Geri gulped. "So you understand that you've made your point." She gestured at Quinn. "That we're willing to take you up on your bargain—divest our wealth to your exact requirements—and work to make things better."

"I do understand that," he said with a nod. "And I do believe that you recognize where you and your families have gone wrong." His expression hardened and his tone went with it. "The problem is that you only recognized it when you had something to lose."

"What?" Geri sat up. "But... why didn't you show us the things you did before you gave us that choice? Everything you put on our walls?"

Rich turned a bored expression on her. "Because the offer wasn't to see who could be shocked or scared into parting with their wealth. It was to see who hadn't become fully consumed by their greed. Once you all told me who you were, well..." He half-shrugged again. "Then it was time to play the real game." He paused. "And if you're wondering why we went with those projections—well, quite frankly, if any of you possessed a conscience, you'd be kept up at night anyway. Since none of you have one, we're improvising with projectors." He made a dismissive gesture. "And either way, the golden ticket was a one-time offer. If you want off the island now... you have to win the game."

Quinn fidgeted. "Even after—"

"Yes," Rich snapped. "Listen, I had high hopes for the two of you. Bright. Educated. You even seemed moderately empathetic. Seemingly decent human beings, despite living in ivory towers. That was why I gave you both time to show that you were better than your parents. That you wouldn't fall into their traps and be like them." He waved a hand. "You could have broken the cycle, but you didn't. You chose greed

over an opportunity to make a massive difference to enormous numbers of people less fortunate than you.” He spread his hands. “And that’s why you’re staying here.”

Quinn and Geri glanced at each other, then faced Rich again.

“But we want to break the cycle,” Geri insisted. “We want—”

“You want to save your own skin,” Rich growled. “Otherwise we’d have had this conversation before two of your peers ruined the boardroom carpet.”

Geri’s mouth went dry. Quinn sat back, exhaling hard.

“I tried to be optimistic that the utter psychopaths in this social strata could learn to see reason,” Rich said. “And certainly some of them can, but I have yet to meet those who will get there without a literal gun to their heads. I’ve run out of patience and I don’t have three ghosts at my disposal.” He eyed them both coolly. “So I’ve begun the process of ridding the world of its most toxic vermin. I give the heirs a chance to prove their humanity. If they don’t— when they don’t...” He trailed off and shrugged dismissively.

“Wait, when you say you’re ridding the world—and you wait for the heirs to...” Quinn shifted in his chair. “Are you saying you killed our parents?”

Rich looked right at him. “Are you surprised?”

Quinn paled. Geri’s stomach knotted. She was shocked, and yet... somehow not. Maybe because she’d stopped assuming there was any depth to which Rich would not go. Murder was very clearly not beneath him. Why should she think that Eric Valentine was his first kill?

A memory swam to the surface. The people moving body bags when she first came to

the island.

Holy shit.

“How?” she breathed. “How do you get away with—”

“With killing some of the most high-profile people in the world?” Rich smirked. “Oh, my dear. It’s so much easier than you would think.”

They both stared at him.

Rich grinned that unsettling grin. “The lifestyles of the rich and famous mean extremes that lesser mortals never experience. Every corpse on Mount Everest is a wealthy idiot who thought he could conquer the world. And most of them stay up there. Some become landmarks for other climbers. And some... Well, some are never found.” He chuckled. “Who’s going to go up and confirm that Ken Whitney actually fell after an ice ledge collapsed during a storm?”

“You...” Quinn blinked. “He didn’t die on Everest?”

“No. A lot of people do, so no one questions it.” Rich picked up his coffee and idly swirled it like wine. “And as I’m sure you’re aware, Mr. Hayworth, helicopters are far more dangerous than people realize. Statistically, very few of them crash. But when they do crash... well.”

Quinn’s breath left him in a rush, and Geri caught up fast. Months before her own father’s death, he’d attended the funeral after Janice and Philip Hayworth had been killed on their way home from Aspen when their helicopter went down.

She sat back, her mind reeling.

Rich wasn't finished. "Sometimes it isn't so elaborate. Sometimes a person's circumstances make killing them without raising questions extraordinarily easy. Incidentally, Ms. Cole, did you know that thallium poisoning mimics Guillain-Barré syndrome?"

Her lips parted as her heart hit the floor. "You... you poisoned my dad?"

He held her gaze. "How difficult do you think it is to offer a life-changing bribe to a desperately underpaid employee to slip something into their employer's food?"

The memories of her father's horrible end crashed over her. The doctors had all said it was pneumonia associated with Guillain-Barré syndrome, which he'd been suffering from for years and had suddenly worsened. That they'd managed his symptoms and done the best they could, but in the end...

"Jesus Christ," she whispered.

"So, what?" Quinn asked. "You're just going to... pick us all off? I mean, even if you kill us, our money goes to others. My sister will inherit my estate. My parents' company will continue. The board of directors and the shareholders will—"

"I'm quite aware, Mr. Hayworth," Rich snapped. "And I assure you, while I may have run out of patience with individuals, I am still a very, very patient hunter. And I will continue to hunt and neutralize and eradicate, following the money from heir to heir, successor to successor, until it lands in the hands of someone who hasn't lost touch with their humanity."

"How many are you going to kill?" Geri rasped. "When does it end?"

"It ends one of two ways." Rich folded his hands on the edge of the desk. "When the heirs use their wealth and power to benefit the masses instead of themselves. Or when

the billionaires are too scared to continue their high-risk lifestyle, and redistribute their wealth out of cowardice.” He chuckled and shrugged. “I’ll accept either outcome, and I’ll keep going for as long as it takes to reach that objective. At the end of the day, there will be fewer billionaires one way or the other.”

Icicles formed along Geri’s spine.

Rich wasn’t a madman.

He was worse—completely rational and coherent, and fully committed to his crusade.

He wasn’t going to let them use the golden ticket. He wasn’t going to let either of them leave unless they won the game.

And he wasn’t going to stop killing until there were no billionaires left.

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Geri and Quinn left Rich's office in shell-shocked silence. They took the elevator down, and as soon as it let them out, they headed straight for the restaurant patio.

The tropical heat was a cool mountain breeze compared to the inside of the hotel, and Quinn couldn't help the sigh of relief as he unsteadily took out his vape pen. Though the heat out here was far less overbearing than the suffocating stuffiness of the hotel, the humidity saturated his clothes. Sweat slicked his skin and rolled down the back of his neck in icy drops.

But the way his clothes stuck to his sweaty skin was the least unpleasant sensation at that moment. The air was too thick to breathe, and his lungs didn't quite remember how to work anyway.

He and Geri hadn't been in Rich's office for long, but it was long enough. The man had casually laid out so many truths that Quinn was struggling to comprehend them all.

Though he'd never been particularly close to his parents, the realization that they'd both been murdered was impossible to stomach. That someone had killed them—along with the helicopter pilot and a family friend—as part of a brutal agenda, made him sick.

And now Quinn was in Rich's crosshairs. And if he didn't make it to the end of this, then Rich would go after Quinn's heirs—his sister and her family.

And there was no getting out now. No claiming that golden ticket off the island. He and Geri were trapped here until the bitter end.

“My God, we’re so fucked,” he murmured to her as they smoked.

“We are.” She blew out some smoke. “I don’t think any of us are meant to survive this. Including whoever ‘wins.’”

“What do you mean?”

“Rich and his men are showing us their faces.” She gestured at the hotel’s upper floors where they’d met with him. “And now he just outright told us he killed your parents and my father. If we go back to the mainland and have someone look into their deaths, and they confirm it—I mean, it’s our word against his, but it’s still pretty damning. If they exhume my father and find evidence of thallium poisoning after Rich said that’s how he killed him...”

Quinn hadn’t thought his blood could get any colder. Turned out he was wrong. “And you’re right—he’s been showing us his face. They’ve all been showing us their real faces.” Raking an unsteady hand through his hair, he breathed, “They’re going to kill us and everyone else on this island.”

Geri shuddered, chafing her arms as if she were cold despite the heat. “If any of us leave, we can identify him and his men. We can blow this whole thing open.” She shook her head slowly. “I doubt we’re getting their real names—I mean, Rich Price? Seriously?—but we’ve seen their faces.” She paused for another drag off her cigarette. “I’ve heard people are actually really bad at identifying suspects from lineups and whatnot, but I’ll never forget that face. Never.”

“Same,” he whispered. “I’ll be able to pick him out at five hundred yards for the rest of my life.”

“Exactly. So they have no intention of letting us go.” She tapped her cigarette’s ashes. When she spoke again, it was just loud enough for him to hear: “We have to

find a way out.”

“We just tried to,” he muttered.

“No, I mean...” She nodded toward the jungle. “Physically. We have to get away from this hotel and... somehow get away from the island.”

“You have any ideas about how to do that?”

Pursing her lips, she shook her head. “No. And from what I could see from the boardroom, the airstrip is empty and so is the marina. I don’t even know where they stashed all the vehicles that were here when we all arrived, but I don’t think it matters. There aren’t any roads beyond the airstrip, so unless you know how offroad...”

“I don’t. I also saw a helicopter down there, but I have no idea how to fly one.” Just the thought made his skin crawl; he’d take any exit he could from this island, but helicopters made him nervous. That was why he hadn’t gone with his parents to Aspen.

“I don’t know how to fly anything,” she said. “Okay. I think our best bet is to scope out every possible escape route from the hotel. We get to the woods or the beach, and just head west. There probably isn’t much on the other end of the island, but maybe we can find... I don’t know. Something . Or get enough signal to reach out.”

It wasn’t much of a plan, and Quinn didn’t like it. The problem was that he didn’t have any other ideas. Like, great, get away from the hotel and run like hell. And then...?

“You still have that signal booster, don’t you?” he asked.

She nodded. “Mmhmm. If we put enough distance between us and the hotel, their jammers won’t work anymore. Then we can call out for help and hope someone gets here before Rich’s boys find us.”

Still not a great plan—not nearly as airtight as something life-or-death should be—but it was something.

“Okay. I’m ready when you are, so just say the word.”

“I will. Try to get some sleep tonight if you can—we’re both going to need it.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Infamous Heiress and Lobbyist Flees Country After News of Federal Warrants for Bribery, Blackmail

Lynnette Baldwin, 51, known on Capitol Hill for her shameless, sleazy, and even illegal methods for persuading politicians, has vanished.

News broke Wednesday that the Department of Justice had completed its investigation into Baldwin and several other lobbyists, and warrants were being issued. Three arrests have been made, but Baldwin is believed to have escaped, likely to a country without an extradition agreement with the United States. Her passport was flagged, but she was likely traveling under an alias.

U.S. law enforcement is currently working with Interpol and other international organizations to track down her location and negotiate extradition.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

The following evening, after another cold, bland meal in the hot, humid restaurant, Geri and Quinn went outside to smoke on the patio. Neither had said much during dinner with their fellow competitors. Those meals were getting quieter and quieter as time went on; everyone was too scared, too tired, and too beaten down to do anything except stare into space and eat the awful food.

Geri had been planning for a long time to give up smoking, even as the stress of running Cole Industries had driven her from one to two packs a day. Now that she was here, she was glad she'd brought smokes; it was one of the only things that kept her more or less sane.

But her cigarettes weren't going to last forever, and neither were the people trapped here. She wasn't interested in waiting around to see if she could win this game and survive—she wanted out. Now.

All day long, while they'd shoveled sand on the beach again, she'd been thinking about this morning's conversation with Quinn and formulating an escape plan. She'd tried and tried to come up with a way to get them all out of here, but the logistics just didn't work. Two people might be able to slip away undetected. Ten? Not likely.

That didn't sit right, but she didn't know what the alternative was.

We can come back for them. If we let the authorities know what's happening, they'll help. They have to.

She hoped, anyway. She'd sure as hell try.

“I’ve been thinking about what we talked about yesterday,” she said quietly to Quinn.

He blew out some vapor. “Yeah?”

“Mmhmm.” She flicked her eyes toward him. “How sore are you?”

“I could stand some painkillers and a massage,” he grumbled.

“Do you think you can run?”

Quinn tensed. “Run?”

She nodded.

He studied her, and he seemed to catch on: she wanted to do this, and she wanted to do it now. Bringing his vape pen to his lips, he said, “Yeah. I can run.”

“Okay.” She broke eye contact as she took a drag from her cigarette. She scanned the patio as casually as she could, assessing where the various guards were and what they were doing. Without looking at him, she quietly said, “There’s a six-foot drop over this railing.” She leaned against it. “From there, it’s about five yards to the tree line.”

She sensed him watching her, but she didn’t confirm it.

He blew out some sweet-scented vapor. “Okay.”

“Once we make a move, we can’t hesitate. They’ll shoot us before we reach the trees.”

In her peripheral vision, he nodded.

“Get into the trees and run like hell. The undergrowth is probably dense, so we might need to get closer to the beach, but stay under the cover of trees as much as possible.”

“Which way do we go?”

“West. If the hotel is behind you and you’re not running into the beach or the airstrip, you’re going the right way.”

A quiet grunt of acknowledgment answered that. Then, “What happens next?”

“I’ve got my phone and my signal booster.” She dropped her cigarette and crushed it under her heel. “I think once we get far enough away—even a mile or two—their signal jammers won’t work anymore.” She turned to him. “Then we call for help and hope for the best.”

Quinn nodded grimly. It wasn’t a perfect plan, and there were a lot of ways it could go wrong, but he didn’t seem to have any notes.

She picked up her cigarette and tossed it in the ashtray. Then she hoisted herself up on the railing, wincing as her exhausted body protested.

One of the sentries looked in their direction, and he tensed as if he were expecting them to make some kind of move.

Geri stayed on the railing, and Quinn continued leaning against it beside her, and they kept talking about benign bullshit until the sentry lost interest in them. Then for another ten or fifteen minutes after that.

Under her breath, Geri asked, “Ready?”

“When you are.”

She nodded and swept her gaze around again. The sentries were bored and disengaged.

“I’m going to distract them,” she murmured.

“Got it.”

She adjusted her grip on the railing. Then she took a deep breath and shouted, “Where’s he going?” She pointed toward the path leading from the balcony toward the cliffs behind the hotel. “Oh fuck, I think he’s going to jump!”

That was enough to turn the sentry’s heads, and she seized their momentary distraction to swing her legs around and drop to the ground below. Her sore ankles and knees screamed at the impact, and she stumbled a step or two, then righted herself and sprinted across the open lawn toward the trees. She didn’t look back to make sure Quinn had followed.

There was shouting behind her. A second after she cleared the tree line, gunfire cracked through the stillness. Birds scattered. Bark flew off the side of a tree trunk. She kept running, using trees to keep herself upright when her feet tangled in the undergrowth.

There were too many bushes, vines, and invisible tree roots to make much progress.

Over her shoulder, she called out, “Head for the beach!”

“Right behind you!” Quinn’s voice almost made her stumble with sheer relief. He’d made it this far.

Bullets still whistled through the jungle. One lodged into a tree in an explosion of bark. Another grazed a trunk just inches from Geri’s shoulder.

There were shouts behind them too, but they faded as Geri and Quinn ran deeper into the woods. Gunfire still cracked, but the bullets went well wide of them or lodged in trees long before reaching them.

Geri would've liked to run until they were at least a mile or two away, but two long days of shoveling sand had taken its toll. Sooner than she wanted, they slowed to a brisk walk. Then a more sedate pace. As frantic as she was to get as far from the hotel as possible, they just couldn't keep running. If they collapsed from exhaustion, they'd be screwed.

Fine. They'd walk. At least they were moving.

She paused to glance back and scan their surroundings. No movement. No signs of life.

She continued, but as she took another step through some dense bushes, an odd metallic sound stopped her in her tracks. "Did you hear that?"

Quinn halted and turned to her. "Hear what?"

She experimentally lifted her foot, then put it down again. Sure enough, metal scraped.

Quinn came closer. "What is that?"

"I don't know." She leaned down and brushed some leaves out of the way. Light glinted off something silver, and she craned her neck. "What the fuck..."

He joined her and looked closer. "Is that... Is that barbed wire?"

"Worse." She eased her foot off and carefully stepped back, making sure she didn't

get tangled and lose her balance. “It’s concertina wire.”

“Like—razor wire?”

“Basically.” She stepped back and squinted at the undergrowth. Now that she knew what to look for, she saw it—the telltale blue-white sheen of sharp metal catching the light. Coiled wire wound between trees in a long serpentine, mostly enveloped by the fronds and vines of plants on the jungle floor. It was impossible to say if it had been put here deliberately, or if it had been discarded or dropped somehow.

Either way, they had to assume this wasn’t the only one.

“Be careful,” she told Quinn as she started picking her way through the foliage again. “There could be more.”

He grunted in acknowledgment, and his steps sounded slow and cautious behind her.

“Maybe we should move on to the beach,” he suggested. “At least then we can see if there’s wire.”

Geri chewed her lip. He had a point. “We’ll be more vulnerable out there.”

“We can run from people.” He gestured at the wire they were avoiding. “If we get tangled in that...”

“True. Okay, let’s head for the beach.”

They took a diagonal path, continuing up the island while also getting closer to the coast. The more distance they put between them and the hotel, the better. All the way to the beach and as they trudged through the sand, Geri didn’t see any more wire; hopefully that continued. The last thing they needed was—

“Stop.”

She halted and turned. “What?”

At first, all she heard was the squawking and singing of birds throughout the jungle. But then she heard it—the whump-whump-whump of a helicopter.

“Shit,” she muttered. “Get back in the woods!”

They scrambled into the jungle again, moving fast but also watching out for more concertina wire.

The tree canopy wasn’t terribly dense—a fair amount of sunlight made it through—but the bushes could provide cover.

“Get down!” she ordered.

Quinn didn’t argue, and they dove under some bushes. Something bit into Geri’s arm and leg, and for a panicked heartbeat, she thought she’d just embedded herself in some more hidden concertina wire. To her relief, it was just some stickers on one of the many vines.

“Stay still,” she said to Quinn as the helicopter flew closer. “The less the bushes move, the less they’ll see.”

“Got it.”

They both stayed still and silent. Overhead, the helicopter came closer. It seemed to be following the edge of the jungle, and Geri’s spine prickled as it flew painfully slowly over their position. She thought it stopped and hovered, but she couldn’t be sure; the noise was so loud now, it was hard to pinpoint if the helo was even moving

anymore.

Finally, it seemed to be heading away from them, continuing west along the island's long coast. She and Quinn stayed in their hiding places. For several minutes, they listened. The helicopter was gone, and there were no sounds except for birds singing and shrieking, but they didn't dare move yet.

After a good fifteen or twenty minutes, the aircraft hadn't come back their way, so they crept out into the open again, both scanning their surroundings for movement.

"I think we're good," he said.

Geri nodded. "Me too. And I think we're far enough from the hotel to see if we've got some signal."

At the very edge of the jungle, Geri leaned against a boulder. Quinn sat on a fallen tree. She fired up her phone. Unsurprisingly, it had no signal. Then she turned on the booster. Its LED blinked yellow as it searched.

"Come on, come on," she muttered.

"You think it'll find something?"

"It should. These are designed to connect with satellites from literally anywhere." She tilted her head back in the direction of the hotel. "I don't even know what kind of jammer they're using that interferes with—"

The yellow LED stopped blinking.

A solid red one came on instead.

No signal.

“Fuck.” She tried again. Still no luck. “For fuck’s sake.” She shut it all off and pocketed it. “We need to get farther away.”

Quinn grunted, and they continued up the beach, staying as close to the trees as they could.

They made it another mile or so without issue. No helicopters. No foot pursuit. No concertina wire. She didn’t let herself get even cautiously optimistic at this point; Rich’s people had the home advantage, and unless she and Quinn could magically teleport off this island, they were fucked until proven otherwise.

“All right.” She stopped and took out the devices again. “Let’s try this again.”

“Fingers crossed,” he muttered as she turned them on.

Geri nodded—fingers definitely crossed.

She held her breath as the LED blinked yellow. For a discouragingly long time, it kept blinking, searching, searching, searching...

And then...

It turned green .

“It’s working,” she said, and unlocked her phone. She turned on her location settings, then sent her location to Beth and Andrew. She followed that with a text message:

SOS. Need help. Urgent! Send help to Faraway Resort ASAP!

Then she shut off both the booster and phone.

“I don’t want to waste the batteries,” she explained to Quinn. “And if our host has signal jammers powerful enough to block this thing”—she gestured with the booster—“then we have to assume they can track signals too.”

Quinn scowled. “That means they could still be tracking us now.”

Her gut clenched. She stared down at the devices in her hand. That was the double-edged sword of transmitting a signal—it couldn’t only be received by the intended recipient. And whether it was turned on or off, a smartphone could still be tracked. Removing the battery wouldn’t even help.

But they were short on options, so she tucked the phone and booster into her pockets. “Let’s keep moving. I’ll check the phone again in a while and see if we got a response. We’ll keep an eye on the water, and hopefully the Coast Guard or someone comes looking for us.”

“Do you have your lighter?”

“Yeah. Why?” But as soon as she asked, she understood.

“If we see a boat or something, our best way to send a message is with a smoke signal.”

“True. All right, let’s keep going. The longer we stand here, the more likely we are to be found by the wrong people.”

So, they continued. Geri’s legs were aching and shaky as if she’d just finished an arduous hike up a damn mountain. Her muscles felt like rubber bands—precarious and loose.

I am never complaining about leg day ever again.

Especially because that would mean she was safe at home with access to a gym, back in a life where a tough leg day registered as something unpleasant.

The thought would've made her mouth water if she wasn't so damn parched.

One miserable, aching step after another, she and Quinn put more distance between them and the Faraway Resort.

And each step took them closer to freedom.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

The setting sun was a blessing and a curse. It meant Quinn and Geri were less visible to anyone pursuing them now, but it meant the same for their surroundings—in particular their footing. Progress was slower, and it didn't help that they had to pause every few steps to poke around in case there was more concertina wire lurking in the shadows.

So far, they'd only encountered the one coil of wire. They couldn't take that for granted, though, and getting tangled in the wire would slow them down far more than their careful slog.

As they walked, they kept glancing toward the ocean, searching for lights that would indicate a boat or a ship. No luck.

They stopped at one point and checked Geri's phone. To their dismay, the texts hadn't gone through at all. They'd both been kicked back as undelivered.

"Shit," she whispered. "I might have to call instead. See if I can reach someone." She paused. "But let's put some more distance between us and the hotel."

He nodded, and they continued their miserable trudge. After another half mile or so, she motioned for him to come a little deeper into the trees with her. He did, and she stopped to lean against a tree trunk, rubbing her lower back. "I just need a minute. We should keep moving, but I feel like I'll collapse if I don't stop."

"I know the feeling," he muttered. His trainer had always harped on him that sleep was critical for a fitness regimen. If the body couldn't recharge and repair itself, then no amount of diet and exercise would keep it healthy. The way Quinn's body hurt all

the way down his toenails while his head throbbed from fatigue—yeah, he believed it.

He leaned against another tree and cracked his neck to one side, then the other. They both stretched and winced. Every time he closed his eyes, he was tempted to keep them closed. God, he needed sleep. He needed sleep so damn bad.

But... not out here.

Except what choice did they have? Eventually, the minds would be willing but the bodies would collapse.

“We should keep moving,” he slurred. “I’m exhausted, but...”

“Me too. Maybe another mile?” Geri nodded back in the direction they’d come. “Then we’ll rest for real.”

Quinn wasn’t sure his legs would carry him another mile, but he also wouldn’t be able to relax if they stayed here. One more mile would give them a little more breathing room. “Okay. Let’s—”

Something jabbed into his back.

Geri gasped, but then a gloved hand covered her mouth. Before Quinn could shout, his mouth was roughly covered too.

“No point in screaming,” a voice hissed in his ear. “No one who hears you will care.”

The thing jabbing into his back prodded harder, and his heart dropped.

That was the muzzle of a gun, wasn’t it?

The memory of Lynnette dying in agony after a single gunshot wound almost drove a whimper of fear out of him.

They didn't shoot him or Geri, though. Not yet, anyway. His arm was yanked behind him and bound. Then the other. Someone grabbed the back of his neck and shoved him toward the beach.

Geri was being similarly manhandled, stumbling as she tried to walk with her hands bound behind her back and someone shoving her every other step.

He squinted, trying to make out the face of the man beside her. They were all nearly impossible to see in the dark, and the night vision goggles covered their faces anyway.

Jesus. They must've been stalking them through the woods, moving stealthily without being hindered by the darkness.

An engine rumbled nearby. A moment later, wide set headlights pierced the night. A Humvee pulled up, and Quinn's heart skipped as he realized it had a large gun mounted on a turret on the back. Someone was manning that gun, too, his face also obscured by NVGs.

Yeah, there was no escaping now. They'd be mowed down in no time.

Though as he was shoved into the Humvee, he had to wonder if that would be so bad. He'd heard getting shot was painful as hell—Lynnette certainly hadn't died an easy death—but a few rounds from a gun that big would probably do enough damage to make it quick, right?

It would suck for a minute or two, and then he wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again.

But he was in the Humvee now, wedged against Geri with a black-clad man sitting on either side of them.

No one spoke as the driver continued up the beach.

Beside him, Geri pushed out a ragged sigh. He turned to her, and she met his gaze in the low light, her face full of fear and despair. He wanted to say something comforting, but there was nothing to say. There was no comfort in a situation like this.

Especially not with the distant hotel coming closer, its lights like a beacon of some portal to hell. God only knew what waited for them when Rich found out they'd tried to leave.

Somehow Quinn didn't think it would be quick or painless.

The Humvee stopped by the hotel's loading dock. Geri and Quinn were both dragged from the vehicle, the men pulling and shoving them enough that they each took a knee on the pavement. They were hauled to their feet, though, and frog-marched in through the loading area. A dark stairwell led down into the bowels of the building, and a dank hallway took them into a cold, musty room with no windows and a single bare lightbulb.

Their cuffs were connected to metal loops welded into the walls. Quinn glanced down, then kept his gaze up because he didn't want to think too hard about what that rust color was or why so much of it was concentrated around a drain at the center of the uneven floor. He hoped the intense metallic smell in his nose and mouth was just from nearby piping and HVAC equipment this time.

He was almost relieved by the coolness of the room. The hotel had become so unbearably hot without the A/C that this was a few degrees more pleasant.

That wasn't much comfort, though, especially not when a big metal door banged shut, sealing them in.

Or when Quinn realized someone else had joined them.

Rich Price.

Oh, fuck...

He stood in front of them, arms crossed, his expression somewhere between a disappointed father and a fucking psycho who was about to lose his shit. Blood pounded in Quinn's ears as the silence stretched on. As their "host" glared at them, not moving and not speaking.

At a silent command from Rich, Mark patted both of them down, and Quinn's heart sank when the goon held up Geri's phone. He handed it over to Rich, who took off its protective case, dropped the phone on the concrete without preamble, and smashed the shit out of it with the heel of his shoe.

Mark didn't find the booster, though. He couldn't have missed it. The device wasn't huge, but the man was thorough, and Geri couldn't have hid it that well in her shorts and T-shirt.

When he informed his boss he'd finished searching, though, he hadn't found it.

Rich inclined his head, flicking his eyes back and forth between Quinn and Geri. "I seem to recall I made myself very clear in my office: no one is leaving."

Geri squirmed beside Quinn. Quinn was too paralyzed with fear to even twitch.

Rich started walking across the small room. Then he turned on his heel and went back

the other way, his dress shoes clicking menacingly on the wet concrete and crunching on the pieces of Geri's phone. "You had a chance to leave. Both of you. A very generous one, if I do say so myself." He snickered without a trace of humor. "Do you know how many people would kill for the option to have a quarter of a billion dollars, not to mention everything else that was included in that golden ticket? I know it doesn't sound like much to people in your ivory towers, but most of the world—most of the people who put you and keep you in those ivory towers—will never see that much money in their entire lives."

He stopped and faced them again, eyes narrow. "You agreed to play the game when you decided to forego that golden ticket."

"We didn't," Geri gritted out. "You didn't tell us all the rules before we agreed."

Rich's laugh was sharp and caustic. "A billionaire suddenly concerned with fairness? Now isn't that poetic." He stepped closer, getting right up in her face, and his voice got even colder. "Consider it a lesson, Ms. Cole, in being dealt a shitty fucking hand, and having no choice but to play that hand. That's something most people learn from real life. People of your station?" He shrugged dismissively. "Well, it's never too late to learn, is it?"

Geri didn't speak. Quinn struggled to breathe.

"Now, before either of you think about trying to escape again." Rich stepped back enough to look at them both. "Keep in mind that neither of you know where you are. You have no idea how far away the nearest dry land is, never mind in what direction. And you don't know the terrain of this island. My men, however, do." He glared right at Geri as he growled, "You're here until you're either dead, or I'm good and ready to let you leave. Is that understood?"

Geri swallowed hard. "Under... Understood."

“That’s what I thought.” He turned his murderous glare on Quinn. “What about you? Do you understand?”

Quinn nodded. “Y-yeah. I understand.”

“Good.” Rich glanced at each of them. “I’d be more than happy to cut both your throats for this. I don’t tolerate insubordination from my employees, and I sure as hell don’t tolerate it from the likes of you.” He shrugged. “But this is a game for twelve, and no one gets out of playing it that easily.”

Quinn shuddered. He thought Geri did too.

Rich turned to Mark. “Get them back to their rooms.” He paused. “But rough them up a bit first so they don’t forget this.”

Mark grinned an icy grin. “Will do, boss.”

Rich left, and Mark turned to Quinn and Geri.

He grinned.

Cracked his knuckles.

And made sure neither of them forgot Rich’s warning.

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If she got off this island alive and returned to the real world, Geri was never going to look at a boardroom the same again.

Sitting around this bloodstained table, her mouth metallic and her stomach sick as bruises throbbed all over her battered body, she had no idea what awaited them now. Or how much more she could take. They'd already spent the whole fucking day shoveling sand again. Wet, heavy sand. Her back hurt. Her soul was raw. Hope seemed as far away as the land she couldn't see from this cursed island.

Quinn had a black eye and a split lip. So did Geri. God, they were a mess, and for what? To be right back here, still playing this fucked-up game.

The one thing that gave her hope was that while Rich had destroyed her phone, the booster was still out there. If she could get back to the place where they'd been apprehended, she could find it again. While the men had been manhandling her toward the Humvee, she'd surreptitiously dropped the device in the sand. She wasn't worried about it being damaged by the elements; it was, after all, designed for warzones, so it would take more than sand and salt to destroy it.

She just needed to find it again and use someone's phone to reach out. Quinn still had his, didn't he?

In the meantime, though, she was stuck at this table again. And if they were in the boardroom, that meant only one thing—shit was about to get worse.

Rich stood at the head of the table, looking entirely too gleeful about being here. "How many of you are familiar with the trolley problem?"

Geri's insides twisted. She remembered the problem from a class in college. How it had been an abstract concept and an interesting way to see how people approached ethics. Somehow, she didn't imagine it would be a benign thought exercise this time.

"Everyone's familiar?" Rich asked, eyebrows up. "It's a pretty common ethical question, is it not?"

Nods and murmurs all around.

"Good. Let's proceed." Rich snapped his fingers. The boardroom door opened, and two suited men wheeled in something that resembled a table turned on its end and draped in a black sheet.

Geri swallowed. Whatever was under that sheet, it couldn't be good. Nothing that happened in this room was ever any variety of good.

"For your next challenge," Rich explained as tablets were placed in front of each competitor. "Every one of you has three options. First, you can cast a vote for one of your opponents to lose. One vote gives that opponent two points."

Geri caught Quinn's eye across the table. He squirmed as if he were trying not to shudder. She could relate.

"Your second option," Rich continued, "is to choose to not cast a vote. In which case..." He pulled the sheet off the upturned table, revealing a board that reminded Geri of a Plinko game. There was a slot at the top, then a number of evenly spaced pins all the way down the board above ten larger slots. In each slot was a name and photo representing one of the people sitting at the table. "If you don't vote, then we'll drop three balls, and let them land where they will."

He pulled a ball out from behind the board and dropped it into the top of the board.

The room was silent except for the thunk, thunk, thunk of the ball bouncing between the pins, changing directions randomly until it dropped into a slot—the one indicating Dan.

Dan made a choked sound, his chair squeaking as he shifted uncomfortably.

“Three balls,” Rich said, “landing randomly on any one of your competitors. Including a one-in-ten chance of landing on yourself.” He pulled the ball out of the slot and tossed it up in the air and caught it like a kid playing with a baseball. “Each ball is a point. In the end, whoever has the most points loses.” His lips peeled back. “And I think you all know by now what happens to losers in this game.”

“You said—” Paul cleared his throat and tried again. “You said there were three options.”

“I did.” Rich caught the ball, and this time, he held on to it. “You have the option to vote for yourself. You gain no points, and everyone else”—he made a sweeping gesture indicating all the players—“loses one point.” He paused as if to let everyone crunch the numbers. Then, “In the end, if everyone has zero or negative points... no one loses.” He shrugged. “You all live to fight another day.”

Geri’s tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She looked from one of her fellow competitors to the next.

“Take your tablets”—Rich gestured at them—“and return to your rooms. You will have three hours to make your decision. Submit your vote, and when ordered, return to the boardroom.” He paused, and his voice hardened as he added, “Do not discuss your votes or your intentions with anyone else.”

Everyone nodded solemnly. No one spoke.

Rich motioned toward the door. “I’ll see you in three hours.”

Geri paced in her suite, wringing her sweaty hands and eyeing the tablet on the bed like a coiled snake.

She had almost no time. She’d been so exhausted after last night’s ordeal and this morning on the beach, she’d fallen asleep when she’d come back to her suite. When she’d woken up, she had less than thirty minutes to make her decision. At least the brief nap had recharged her brain a little; she’d take what she could get at this point.

The trolley problem, at its core, was a question of passively allowing something to happen versus actively causing it. A person had to decide if they would rather do nothing and allow five people to be run over by the runaway trolley, or flip the switch and be the reason the trolley ran over one person.

It had always been easy in her mind: flip the switch and kill the single person, saving the other five. The answer was always to minimize casualties.

It should’ve been easy now, but it wasn’t abstract anymore, and not just because her answer could be the reason a fellow competitor died a horrible death.

All the images of her company’s weapons destroying, maiming, and killing were burned into her mind. Those people—those civilians, those children—suffering and dying were the minimized casualties. They were the people who died while hundreds or thousands or more survived because the weapons were more precise than their predecessors, allowing for targeted destruction instead of a shotgun “spray-and-pray” approach.

But each of those people had a life and loved ones and pain and fear. They were the person tied to the track who’d die if the switch was flipped, and they weren’t as faceless and anonymous as they were supposed to be in the thought exercise.

She recalled a girl in her class who'd innocently and naively asked, "Can't we talk about all the ways we could keep a trolley from losing control in the first place?"

Geri and some of her classmates had snickered and rolled their eyes. The professor had kindly pointed out that this was a thought exercise, and she was overthinking the situation. The girl had insisted that problems like this didn't exist in a vacuum, and perhaps it was worth discussing how to prevent them from happening.

"For that," the professor had said with a chuckle, "I would recommend a class on engineering, not ethics."

The girl had been flustered and embarrassed in that moment, and Geri had pitied her for struggling to stomach the idea that, yes, there were times when these decisions had to be made. Even if every possible safeguard were implemented, shit happened and trolleys malfunctioned.

Sitting here in this hellishly hot hotel room, an impossible decision pressing down on her aching shoulders, Geri wasn't laughing at that girl anymore.

It hadn't once dawned on her in that fluorescent-lit lecture hall that she would be the trolley manufacturer. That she'd help lay the tracks, build the trolleys, and cut the corners that allowed for problems to arise that led to questions of killing a few to avoid letting the many die. Her entire company existed to sharpen the tools of war and make victory as quick and clean as possible with minimal casualties and collateral damage.

But those casualties and collateral damage were no longer numbers on paper or stick figures tied to cartoon tracks. Especially now that she understood her father's role—and her company's role—in persuading people in power to keep those trolleys coming so they could keep profiting off flipping switches.

She understood now. Not just that abstract question presented by her ethics professor, but her role in diverting trolley after trolley of her own company's making onto people whose only crime was being on the wrong track. She had ever since the horror show of her first night in this room.

All this time, everything she and her family had done to get rich and stay rich, had been... wrong. Destructive. Evil.

And she'd had a chance to get off this island with her life, but she'd stupidly passed it up. All the wealth she'd chosen to hold on to over escaping—even if she hadn't known in the moment that she was choosing to potentially die, it was a painfully foolish decision. Out of greed, she'd passed up the opportunity to get out of this not only alive, but uninjured and untraumatized.

All she could do now was hope she survived long enough to start putting things right when she got home.

She had to survive. The trolley was barreling toward all of them, and she had to make a decision.

She had to vote, and her vote would count toward someone dying. She needed someone else to lose this game. The only way off this island was to win, and that started with making sure someone else got more points than her in this challenge. It would be simple enough to drop two points onto another player. Or let the three single-point balls land where they would.

Eric and Lynette's final moments flashed through her mind, and she swallowed bile. There was no telling how the loser of this game would die, but she doubted it would be quicker or less painful than those two.

Geri rubbed her eyes and swore into the silence of the room. It was one thing to flip

the switch and cause someone to die to save the others. It was another to pick someone out of the crowd and say, “You.”

In the end, the one and only vote her flayed conscience could stomach was for herself. While it wouldn't add any points to her score, it would drop everyone around her by one, potentially putting her ahead. Not ideal, but the alternatives...

Fuck. She just couldn't do it.

Not even if it meant putting her own survival in the hands of people who needed her to die so they could win.

She took a deep breath. Then she picked up the tablet off the bed.

And she cast her vote.

The boardroom was deathly silent. Everyone had returned. They'd handed over their tablets.

Now they were alone. Ten competitors sitting around the bloodstained boardroom table. No security. No Rich. Just the table, the players, and the Plinko board with their names on it.

There were no cameras in the room. Geri couldn't decide if they were hidden, or if Rich had just dropped the pretense of this being an actual reality show. Now that he had their metaphorical balls in a vise, there was no need to continue pretending they were filming as agreed.

This wasn't a reality show. It was reality .

Bloody, violent, horrific reality.

And only one person at this table would leave the island alive. Someone sitting here right now would be dead before this challenge was over.

Maybe.

“In the end,” Rich had explained, “if everyone has zero or negative points... no one loses. You all live to fight another day.”

As she looked from one face to the next, Geri wondered if anyone else had voted for themselves. If they all did, then everyone would have negative points and no one would lose.

Did any one of you vote so that I’ll also lose points?

Her heart sank. Everyone here wanted to save their own skin. Was any one of them willing to risk themselves to help the others at the table?

Forget letting the trolley passively run someone over. There isn’t a person at this table who wouldn’t throw someone else under the trolley to save themselves.

Fuck.

She hated herself for wishing she could take back her vote and take a more mercenary approach. She couldn’t have picked someone by name, but she could’ve gambled. Let three balls fall into place. Let fate take it from there. Passively increase the odds of someone dying, even if there was a chance that someone would be herself.

All she’d done with her vote was decrease the odds of her nine competitors losing. Which increased her own odds. With each passing second, she felt worse about that decision because she just didn’t have faith that anyone else sitting here had done the same.

And there was nothing she could do about it now.

Rich strolled in a few minutes later. At the head of the table, he put on his game show grin as he picked up his remote and a tablet. “The votes have been tallied. Let’s find out the results, shall we?”

He clicked the remote, and on the large screen, all of their faces appeared with red zeros beneath them.

Geri wasn’t religious by any means, but she sent up a plea for help to anyone who might be listening. At this point, it couldn’t hurt.

Rich glanced at the tablet in his hand. “Three players voted for themselves—Geri, Quinn, and Kit.”

Under each of their names, a -2 appeared. Under everyone else’s, -3 .

On the right of the screen, a leaderboard appeared. The three of them were shown as tied for second place. Everyone else tied for first.

Geri gulped. So much for everyone working together so they could all survive this thing.

“Mr. Woolman.” Rich looked right at Dan. “Why don’t you tell us who you voted for?”

Dan blanched. “We—I didn’t realize these would be... We’re all going to announce our votes?”

“Well, yes.” Rich grinned. “How else did you think it would go?”

Dan gulped. Everyone else glanced at each other wide-eyed as if they too had expected this to be a secret ballot. And the votes had been submitted electronically, so it wasn't like anyone could backpedal at this point.

Across the table from Geri, Quinn rolled his shoulders and exhaled. She could relate; she didn't like being in last place, but being spared the experience of saying her vote for someone else out loud was a plus. Somehow even if she'd voted for the passive choice, she'd still feel scrutinized and guilty for being the reason the balls landed on other people's names.

Christ, this game was a mindfuck.

"Mr. Woolman." Rich inclined his head. "We're waiting."

Dan cleared his throat and fidgeted in his chair. Elena was watching him, and he pointedly did not meet her gaze. Not even when she put a hand on his leg.

After a moment, he took a deep breath. "My vote is for Charlie Simmons."

Elena's lips parted and she subtly withdrew her hand.

Charlie slammed his fist down on the table. "You son of a bitch. A vote for me so you can keep fucking my wife while—"

"Your ex -wife, Charlie," Elena snapped, and she emphatically put her hand back on Dan's thigh. "You don't own me."

Dan put his hand over hers, but he didn't look at anyone.

On the board, two points appeared beneath Charlie's picture. On the leaderboard, he went from -3 to -1, bumping him to last place.

Geri hated herself for how relieved she felt. She wasn't out of danger yet—no one was—but the sharks were currently nipping closer to Charlie, and she gladly stole the opportunity for a few relieved breaths.

“Mr. Simmons.” Rich looked at Charlie. “How did you vote?”

Charlie worked his jaw, glaring daggers at Dan and Elena. He was probably wishing he could change his vote. Then he squared his shoulders and met Rich's gaze. “I voted for Elena.”

That sent a ripple of shock through the room, and Elena shouted, “Oh, fuck you! You're just upset that I'm screwing Dan, and now you want me dead?” She stood, sending her chair toppling onto the floor at her feet. “Well, guess what, Charlie?” With that, she grabbed Dan's face and kissed him hard. Dan made a surprised noise, but he didn't pull away, and everyone else stifled uncomfortable laughter as they averted their eyes from the bawdy display.

Above their heads, the numbers changed. Elena dropped on the leaderboard, tied with her husband at -1 .

Dan and Elena separated, and she took her seat again, glaring defiantly at her ex-husband while Dan's red face was a mix of surprise and smugness.

“Well.” Rich laughed dryly. “In the interest of keeping things interesting—why don't you go next, Ms. Simmons?”

Elena crossed her arms and continued glaring at Charlie. “For as much as that son of a bitch can rot and die, I voted for...” She gestured at the Plinko board.

Rich nodded. At his order, Tyson stepped up to the Plinko board and, one after another, dropped three balls through the top slot.

The whole room was dead silent except for the thunk, thunk, thunk as the balls bounced this way and that. They came to rest on Kyle, Art, and Kit.

Everyone else voted for the Plinko option. As each ball fell, Geri had to wonder if Rich had chosen to do this with an analog system—rather than having the points distributed randomly by a computer—to ensure it truly was random. That the only control the voters had was if they voted for themselves or someone specific. By leaving it up to chance, anything was possible. No one's wealth, influence, philanthropy, family name, or even pleading could stop points from racking up beneath their names.

And in the end, no one could claim bias because they'd left it to chance and gravity.

When the last three balls were dropped into the machine, Art and Elena were tied with the highest scores. Kit was a point behind both of them.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Dan. Alan.

Elena.

The ball had barely landed behind her name before she collapsed into tears, screaming and sobbing and begging and pleading not to be killed.

Tyson and Kevin were coming around the table toward her, and she trembled so bad she nearly tumbled out of her chair.

Dan threw an arm around her shoulders. "Baby. Baby, listen to me! Listen—look at me!"

She froze and stared at him, eyes huge and red.

“Your pass,” he said. “Remember your pass!”

She faced him with tears streaming down her face, but then something must have clicked. She snapped her head toward Rich and slapped her palm on the table. “My pass—the one, I—to get out of losing. The elimination pass! I want to use it!”

Tyson and Kevin halted, and they watched their boss with an unspoken “what do we do now?” on their faces.

Rich didn’t seem the least bit surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Yes! Please!” Elena said. “I don’t want to die!”

“All right.” Rich tapped his tablet screen. Elena and her score vanished from the screen and the leaderboard.

And in her place, Art was the new loser.

Tyson and Kevin changed direction and headed for Art’s side of the table, each moving the opposite direction so there was no escape. As they closed in on him, he balked, showing his palms. “Whoa, whoa! This isn’t fair! This isn’t right! She lost, so she should be—”

He stopped when Rich pulled a handgun out from under the table.

“Mr. Price,” he pleaded. “Please. Please, you don’t need to...”

“Go on, Mr. Keller.” Rich reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a few bullets. “Do tell. Why shouldn’t I kill you? Because if I don’t kill you”—he swung the

muzzle of the gun toward the other competitors—“I’m going to kill one of them. So, speak up.” He raised his eyebrows and started loading a magazine. “Why should one of them die in your place?”

Art’s mouth opened and closed like a fish’s. He looked from one competitor to the next. “I… Well, I mean, this is ridiculous! We shouldn’t have to die! You’ve made your point, Mr. Price. Can’t we just go home and try to course correct and—”

“No.” The word was simple and flat. Rich aimed the gun at Art’s center of mass. “You lose, Art. So unless you’ve got a reason why—”

“My company helps people!” Art bellowed. “We’re on the cusp of curing cancer! These people”—he gestured wildly at his fellow competitors—“they’re destroying the environment! Blowing people up! I help people .” He flailed his hand at Paul. “His company destroys the environment and helps spread lies! He’s the—”

“Your company hired mine for advertising!” Paul threw back. “Now we’re destroying—”

“You’ve seen the videos he’s showed us!” Art pointed at the screen. “It’s your fault he got us here! It’s your fault he—”

“Mr. Keller.” Rich sounded bored. “This is about why you shouldn’t die.” He thumbed another round into the magazine. “Not why Paul is responsible for harmful disinformation and environmental destruction.”

Paul turned a little green, but he stayed quiet.

Art swallowed. “My company helps people,” he insisted again. “I told you—we’re on the cusp of curing cancer!”

“Mmhmm.” Rich arched an eyebrow. “And how much is that cure going to cost the average citizen?”

Art stammered a bit. Then he shook his head. “This is insanity! You’re a goddamned serial killer, not—”

Tyson slapped Art on the back. Hard .

Art lurched forward, then whirled around, knocking his chair to the floor as he rose. “What the fuck?” he demanded.

But everyone at the table gasped.

On his back, where Tyson had hit him, something had stuck to him—a small sheet of white plastic about six inches square. Blood was starting to seep out around the edges.

“You might want to sit down,” Tyson said coldly. “It’ll be a long fall once that kicks in.”

“Once it—once what?” Art flailed, trying to reach for the thing on his back. He cried out in pain as he kept trying and failing to reach it. “Oh God. What have you done to me?”

Kevin righted Art’s chair. Tyson grabbed the screaming man by the shoulders and shoved him down into it.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Rich said mildly. Tyson and Kevin nodded, and they stepped back from the table. “Mr. Keller, if you have anything you’d like to say to anyone”—Rich made a show of checking his watch—“I’d get it out now. You’re probably going to be preoccupied in the next five to ten minutes.”

“‘Preoccupied’?” Art stared at him in horror. “What did you do to me?”

“Well, it’s less what we did to you.” Rich grinned. “And more what the venom of the Irukandji is about to do to you.”

Quinn sucked in air, his eyes widening.

“What?” Art grabbed Quinn’s arm. “What’s he talking about? What does that mean?”

Quinn gulped. “Irukandji. The box jellyfish.”

Art blinked. He stared at Quinn, then at Rich. “What does it do? What does—God, tell me what the fuck it’s going to do!”

“We could do that.” Rich gave an evil laugh. “But why ruin the surprise?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Eric Valentine had died a painful, terrifying death after having his throat slit, but it had been over in a matter of minutes. Lynette Baldwin had taken a bullet to her midsection, and that protracted misery was still burned into Quinn's mind.

But it was Art Keller's execution that drove home how much Rich Price intended to not only kill them, but extract vengeance or karma or God knew what through pure, unmitigated suffering.

Art had about ten minutes to freak the fuck out about what was going to happen, begging and pleading for someone to tell him what the effects were. Quinn knew, but he couldn't bring himself to tell him. He got the feeling Dan and Paul also knew—something about their pained expressions and the way they couldn't look at Art gave them away—but they kept mum as well.

The Irukandji venom began causing pain immediately. In minutes, Art's pleas began to devolve into wordless cries of agony. After about twenty minutes, though, the true misery started to set in. He was beyond speaking coherently, clutching his chest and arching on top of the bloodstains Eric had left what seemed like a lifetime ago. Quinn couldn't remember if seizures were a symptom, and he wasn't sure if Art was seizing at all or if he was just writhing in agony. His breathing became increasingly labored, which could've been panic or it could've been respiratory arrest setting in. It could've been both.

None of them could do a thing for him. Irukandji was known for causing some of the worst pain a human being could experience, and there was nothing anyone in this room could do to bring him relief. The only thing that could possibly help him was antivenom, and Quinn didn't even know if there was antivenom for the box jellyfish.

Maybe Art's company made one. Maybe Rich was withholding it the way he accused Art of withholding medications from people by overpricing them. All Quinn knew was that he didn't have any kind of antivenom, and Art's screams and whimpers were going to haunt his nightmares until the end of time.

It took far, far too long, but Art finally died.

Quinn had no idea how much time had passed. How much time they all had to sit there and listen to another human being scream and thrash and gasp before the poor man sputtered his last. When it was over, Rich's men collected his body with all the reverence of someone scraping up roadkill.

After they'd gone, everyone in the boardroom stared at each other and at the blood stains all over the room. It looked like a massacre had happened here. Even now, after bearing witness to each horrible death, Quinn struggled to believe the bloodstains had accumulated over a period of days. A single mass killing was difficult to stomach. Separate solo murders each adding to the bloodstains was...

That was too fucking much.

And staying here another day was more than he could handle.

Quinn wasn't afraid to die. He wasn't even afraid of getting beat up again. After watching what Rich Price was capable of, though, he was definitely afraid of how he might die.

As the group reeled in silence from Art's awful death, he stole a look at Geri. She'd be onboard with whatever plan he came up with.

But if they got caught...

Fuck. They'd both been beaten up and warned—repeatedly—not to try again. He didn't want to leave her behind—hell, he didn't want to leave anyone behind—but she'd be safer here. She'd have no knowledge of his plan. She'd have no part of it.

She wouldn't be punished for it.

That was what he'd do, then. He'd get the hell out of here, and then find a way to come back for Geri and the others.

Filled with determination, he closed his eyes and took in a long breath.

Then he shuddered; he was never going to get used to the constant taste of copper when he was in this awful room.

He didn't want to get used to it. Something that horrible wasn't something anyone should be adapting to.

And the sooner he got out of here, the sooner he could get back to living a life that didn't involve the constant smell of blood.

He scanned the people in the room. No, he wouldn't risk any of them. He'd shoulder the risk himself, and when he got help, he'd send that help back here for them. He wasn't abandoning these people. None of them. Not even the ones he didn't like.

He was getting out of here, damn it, and coming back for them.

Step one—make a plan.

Quinn ran as fast as his sore, exhausted legs could carry him. He avoided dense bushes as much as possible (which was difficult in this jungle), mostly out of fear of getting tangled in concertina wire.

So far, so good.

It helped that the sun was still up, though it wouldn't be for long. He'd timed it as precisely as he could—enough light to get out of the hotel and gain some ground while he could still see, and then darkness to hide him while he moved more slowly toward what he hoped was freedom. He wouldn't stop this time. Not when he knew the men had NVGs at their disposal.

His plan was, much like the one he and Geri had crafted, not much of a plan. It was less strategy and more “run like hell and figure out the next step later.”

He'd slightly underestimated how much Rich's men would be watching for a competitor to make such an attempt again. He'd barely made it off the patio before someone had been hot on his heels, and the bullets didn't miss him by as much as he would've liked. The helicopter was already whump-whump-whumping toward him from somewhere, and the shouts behind him said they weren't concerned with stealth this time.

The element of surprise had worked in his and Geri's favor.

Tonight, the RightPriceTek goons had been ready.

Not ideal.

He vaulted over a fallen tree and stumbled a little, his exhausted legs not quite making the jump or the landing as cleanly as he'd hoped. He recovered, though, and he started picking up speed again.

His leg grazed a bush, and the rustle of foliage had a distinctly metallic sound.

A glance to his left confirmed it—concertina wire.

Fuck. Was that the same coil of wire Geri had found? Or was this another?

Had Rich's men booby-trapped the whole damn jungle?

Yeah, probably.

"Son of a bitch," he hissed, and he forced himself to go on despite the danger near his feet, the burning in his legs, and the way his lungs screamed for him to stop.

"Vaping is bad for your lungs, you know," his sister had told him umpteen million times. "They don't even know how bad yet."

Oh, wouldn't that be irony—his escape attempt being thwarted by his vice.

Crack!

A second later, something hot dug into his back just below his ribs. He shouted and stumbled, and he instinctively reached back to the wound.

There was something sticking out of his flesh. He yanked it free and glared at it.

Oh. Fuck .

A tranq dart? Really? Fucking really?

He swore as he threw the dart into the concertina bushes, and he kept running. How long did these things take to take effect, anyway?

Not long enough to get off this island.

The pessimistic thought made his whole aching body want to slow down and

surrender. Or maybe that was the medication in the dart. He didn't know.

But he kept pushing forward. Even when the burn in his legs turned to something heavier and more rubbery. Even when his vision started to sparkle, and then darken, around the edges.

Even when...

Fuck.

His foot caught on a tree root.

He couldn't put his arms out to catch himself, and he landed hard on his face and chest.

Somehow...

He didn't feel a thing.

Bizarre dreams of snakes and concertina wire filled his world for a long, long time. At least he'd been able to sleep. That was no small feat with those projections and speakers in his suite. Maybe he'd finally gotten too tired for even those awful things to keep him awake.

Except...

He wasn't in the hotel bed. He wasn't hot and sticky from sweat.

Oh, fuck. This was the same room he and Geri had been shoved into after they'd made their escape attempt.

How had they gotten him in here this time, though?

The sore spot on his back reminded him of the hot stabbing feeling, which reminded him of the dart, which...

Shit. They'd tranquilized him and brought him back here. Couldn't they have just shot him? Because then he'd be dead. He wouldn't be in this awful room, he wouldn't have to take part in this sadistic competition, and it would all be over.

And he sure as hell wouldn't be facing down Rich Price.

"Mr. Hayworth." The man peered down at him with a look that said you fucking idiot . "I thought we discussed this already. Didn't we?" His arched eyebrow dared Quinn to refuse to answer.

"We did," Quinn croaked.

"We did. And yet, here you are." Rich took a step closer. "Did you not believe me? Did you think I was bullshitting you? Lying?" He inclined his head. "Joking?"

"N-no." Quinn swept his tongue across his lips. "No, I didn't."

"And yet..." Rich gestured at Quinn.

Quinn swallowed hard. He didn't even know what to say. Rich was going to kill him one way or the other, so why dig himself a deeper grave?

Rich narrowed his eyes as a sly grin curled his lips. "You think I'm going to kill you, don't you?"

Well, now that you mention it...

“Yes,” Quinn breathed.

“I can see why you’d think that. I want to kill you. I very much want to be done with you being a pain in my ass.” His grin broadened. “But I’m not finished with you yet. Just like I’m not finished with any of your fellow competitors.”

This was going to get worse. There was no way around that.

“Let’s be absolutely clear, Mr. Hayworth,” Rich hissed. “Anyone else, I’d have killed and been done with it. But you see, I’ve been watching you and the others, and I can see that there is a spark of humanity in you. There’s empathy that so many billionaires just lack. You’re not quite as much of a sociopath as the others.”

Quinn gulped. Somehow he didn’t think he was going to be rewarded for that.

“So, with that in mind,” Rich went on, “If you try anything like this again, I won’t kill you. Instead, you’ll watch while I torture and kill every single one of your fellow competitors right in front of you. One after the other. Until they’re begging for the release of death. And then I’ll keep torturing them until their bodies give out.”

The words “You’re going to do that anyway” lodged in Quinn’s throat. Because yes, Rich was going to do it anyway. Looking into those evil eyes, Quinn understood more profoundly than ever that no matter how bad he could imagine things getting, they could always be so, so much worse. And an enraged Rich Price determined to make Quinn regret his life choices could make too many people suffer too much.

“Understood,” Quinn said unsteadily. “I... It won’t happen again.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other. But just in case you have any thoughts of renegeing on that...” Rich turned to Tyson and gestured at Quinn. “He’s all yours.”

Quinn's heart dropped. Tyson grinned.

And what followed was the longest night of Quinn's life.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Oh God. They were going outside again.

Geri's legs didn't want to cooperate, but she followed the other competitors outside onto the restaurant patio. They hadn't even had a chance to eat breakfast yet—the moment they'd come downstairs, they'd been herded out here.

Another day of shoveling sand? This time on an empty stomach?

Was it too much to ask for some deity to show up and smite her? Because that seemed like the most merciful end at this point.

When the fuck does this end?

To her surprise—and horror—they weren't taken to piles of sand that needed moving. Not yet, anyway. Instead, they were herded onto the restaurant patio where Rich was waiting for them.

As much as his charismatic game show host smile usually made her skin crawl, its absence now turned her blood to ice. What the hell was happening?

When Rich spoke, his voice was hard. "I thought I made myself very, very clear." He glared at all of them. "That attempts to escape will not be tolerated. Or successful."

Geri's spine straightened. Someone else had made an attempt? She looked down the line of remaining contestants. Kit, Alan, Paul, Elena, Dan, Char—

Quinn.

Oh, fuck. Where was Quinn? In the haze of fatigue and fear, she hadn't even realized he was missing.

As if on cue, Kevin and Tyson came around the corner, each holding one of Quinn's arms. His feet dragged in the sand, and his head lolled with every movement. Dried blood matted his blond hair and covered one side of his face. Fresher blood ran from his mouth and nose. Was he even alive?

Geri stared, hands over her mouth, not even breathing as she searched for a sign—any sign—that Quinn was alive.

The men dumped Quinn at Rich's feet. The low groan and the way Quinn curled in on himself were nauseating but reassuring; as much pain as he was in, he was alive.

"You're all here until you are eliminated, or until the game is over." Rich kicked Quinn hard in the ribs, and Quinn made a choked, pained sound. "Anyone tries to leave early, I promise—there is no third warning." He gave Quinn's back a savage kick. "Am I understood?"

Everyone nodded and murmured as Quinn groaned and spat blood on the ground.

"Am I understood?"

"Yes!" the group called out in unison.

"Good," Rich growled. To Kevin, he said, "Get him inside. The rest of you?" He waved sharply at Tyson.

As Kevin started scraping Quinn up off the ground, Tyson led the group down toward the beach. Geri looked back, wishing she could help Quinn. He was alive, yes, but how bad was he hurt? He could be bleeding internally. He could be concussed. He

could—

“Ms. Cole,” Tyson barked. “You’re lagging behind!”

Geri faced front again and jogged to catch up. “Sorry. Sorry.”

Evidently Rich’s men intended to punish all of them for Quinn’s escape attempt—they put the group to work in the hot sun without first letting them eat. Everyone was wobbling and staggering, and even Geri ended up on her knees a couple of times. Not for long, though. Tyson or Kevin would be right there, screaming, “Get the fuck up and keep working! Now!”

Their breaks came, and they helped, but no one was steady on their feet for the entire day. Lunch didn’t even help much when exhaustion and heat drove people to puking. Geri didn’t think she’d ever been dizzy or more exhausted, but fear kept her digging and walking, digging and walking, digging and walking.

Even through the haze and misery, she worried about Quinn. With every step she took on the sand, with every shovelful she scooped, carried, and dumped, her fear for him deepened. Was he all right? Was he still alive?

She needed to get back to the hotel and find out.

Geri finished showering off the sand and blood, put on some clothes over her burned skin, and left her suite. She jogged down the hall to Quinn’s door, and she knocked on it. “Quinn? Quinn, are you in there?” She banged on it again. “Quinn?”

There was some movement on the other side. She thought so, anyway; her heart was pounding so hard, she could’ve been hearing things.

But then the deadbolt clicked. The door opened, and Quinn looked like he was about

to collapse. One eye was swollen almost all the way shut. The other was black and bloodshot. The dried blood in his hair and on his skin had been washed away, but there were cuts and bruises all over his face, neck, and bare chest. He leaned hard on the door as if he were barely holding himself up. Angry bruises ringed his neck as if someone had tried to strangle him, either with their hands or some kind of ligature.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Come on—you need to sit.” She stepped into the room and herded him toward one of the chairs.

He shifted direction and went for the bed instead, lying back on the mattress with a painful groan.

She sat carefully beside him, making sure not to jostle him. Once she’d settled, she took his hand and squeezed it. “Are you okay?”

He drew the tip of his tongue along his split lower lip. “I’m alive.” The way he made that sound like an admission of defeat made her heart ache.

“What happened?”

He closed his eyes and absently ran his knuckles along an unbruised part of his jaw. “I thought I could get away. Thought I could get farther this time than we did because I knew the terrain a bit better.” He exhaled as he shook his head. “Rich’s thugs brought me back, and they spent the whole damn night working me over.” He laughed bitterly. “I’m surprised he didn’t send me out there to work on the chain gang with the rest of you.”

“Could you even stand up?”

He eyed her. “Do you think that would stop him?”

She exhaled. “Good point.”

Quinn sighed, and he winced as he rolled his shoulders. “We’re gonna die here, Geri. There’s no way out.”

Arguments of “no, we’re not” and “yes, there is,” surged to the tip of her tongue, but they fell away as her own hopelessness sank in.

She clasped his hand tighter in hers. “Then we go down fighting. We keep—”

“There’s no point.” He stared down at their hands and shook his head. “They’ll just keep working us to death and”—he gestured at his face. “They’re going to kill us one way or the other.”

It hit her in the gut, seeing him this destroyed. She couldn’t even say if it was the whole debacle that had done it, or if the men who’d beaten him had broken his spirit. Either way, it hurt to see what Rich and his minions had done to him.

“Look, someone might survive. My dad’s colleague—I think he went through this too. Made it back after everyone else”—she made air quotes—“went down when that storm sank the superyacht.”

“But he didn’t say a word about what happened.”

“No, he didn’t.” She held back that he’d killed himself; Quinn had hit the end of his hope, and she didn’t want to drive him over the brink. “We can’t run. We can’t talk our way out of this. The only thing we can do is try to win.”

He swallowed painfully. “Only one of us will.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But I don’t know what else to do. Try to win. Try to get

the hell out of here and get back home. It's... the only alternative is to lay down and surrender."

He winced, and she wasn't sure if it was because of what she'd said or because his throat hurt.

She squeezed his hand again. "We can't give up. We have to keep trying to survive."

"I know." He closed his eyes and exhaled. "But I just can't help thinking that's off the table for all of us." He met her gaze. "Even if we do, look what it's done to us. One way or other..." He shook his head, and his voice was barely audible as he added, "We're never going home. Not completely."

Geri's chest hurt as his words sank in. He was right. She knew he was right. The people they were when they'd set foot on this island were already dead and gone.

She wasn't even sure who she was trying to convince as she whispered, "We have to try."

Quinn nodded. He didn't argue.

He probably didn't have anything left.

The torment was relentless. If they weren't shoveling sand, they were moving huge rocks. If they weren't in the boardroom, never knowing if a challenge was just a mindfuck or something lethal, they were waiting for someone to tell them what fresh hell was next. If they weren't trying to sleep through horrific projections, they were eating cold, congealed food in smaller and smaller portions. Some of it tasted a bit off, too, and it often didn't sit well in people's stomachs.

Another challenge came and went. Geri was almost numb to the horror by the time

she watched one of Rich's men inject Kit Mason with strychnine. Kit had lost a challenge relating to class action lawsuits and settlements, and her company had turned out to be the one most aggressively paying people to shut up about cancer, birth defects, and deaths associated with her products.

The most disturbing thing about Kit's protracted and agonizing execution was the empty chasm in Geri's chest. She was so beaten down in so many ways, she was emotionally flatlining even as she watched another human being convulse and froth at the mouth before breathing finally ceased.

What the fuck has this place done to me?

Kit was still on the floor beneath the windows when the remaining competitors were dismissed from the boardroom. As everyone got up and headed for the door in silence, Geri couldn't help but drift to one of the windows across the room from Kit.

Standing there, body aching and mind still reeling, she stared out at the inescapable island below. The airfield that would take her nowhere. The marina without boats. The endless sea. She may as well have been bobbing in a lifeboat the middle of the ocean, far beyond the reach of electronics and the notice of passing ships. A cracked, sinking lifeboat surrounded by sharp, patiently circling fins.

At one point, she'd analyzed this view for a means of escape. Today, with Quinn still battered and bruised from his second attempt to flee, and her own body just healed from their first try, all she saw outside the windows was forbidding terrain and hopelessness. Their captor had thought of everything. He was, at every turn, several steps ahead of them.

Which made her wonder—how many times had Rich played this game so far? How many safeguards had he put into place because of trial and error after previous contestants had tried to outsmart him? How many people only existed in fake videos

for weeks, months, maybe years before they met tragic and unexpected ends on mountain expeditions, helicopter flights, and deep-sea explorations?

How many body bags had been thrown onto trucks on the hotel's loading dock?

Jesus Christ. How deep did this go?

Someone appeared beside her. She sensed the presence of a person, and there was a transparent reflection on the glass, but she didn't look. She was aware that the room had gone quiet in that way that suggested it was empty. No one remained except the two of them and the stuffy air that tasted of copper.

"It's quite a beautiful island, isn't it?" Rich's voice sent ice down her spine.

"It is," she acknowledged cautiously.

They stood in unsettling silence. She half-expected him to chastise her for not following the other competitors out of the room as ordered, but he said nothing.

She was afraid of him, but also intensely curious about him. And hell, she was probably dead soon anyway, so why not satisfy the curiosity before she joined Kit and Art and...

She cleared her throat. "You own a private island. With an airstrip and an enormous hotel." She turned to him. "You're one of us, aren't you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, like you, I was born into more wealth than anyone could spend in a

dozen lifetimes.” He met her gaze. “Where we differ is that I saw the injustice of what I had and how I lived.”

“And this is your solution to it.”

He shrugged unrepentantly.

Anger flashed through her, but she kept her tone even; as doomed as she was, survival instinct still kept her treading somewhat carefully. “So instead of helping people on the bottom, you’re eradicating the people at the top?”

“Who says I’m not doing both?” He laughed quietly. “Who says I’ve never anonymously paid for GoFundMe pages on the very same day I kicked a human parasite off this mortal coil?”

“Have you?”

“I’m not the monster you think I am. I can dispatch a man whose mining company contaminates millions of gallons of drinking water, and then go home and make sure a dozen children have their cancer treatment paid for.”

She shifted on her sore feet, unsure what to make of his answer. Of... well, of anything he did or said or thought. Sometimes the light hit him just right to make him look like Ted Bundy. Then the shadows would shift and he’d be Robin Hood. Now and then, both would shine through.

The impulse to draw away from him and widen this space between them was almost irresistible, but she couldn’t move. It was like standing in the crosshairs of a predator—a sudden move could make it attack, but too much stillness could also make it see an opportunity for the killing blow. Blood pounding in her ears, goose bumps prickling on her sun-scorched skin, she was paralyzed in his gaze as if

hypnotized by a snake.

“It’s really not complicated, Geri,” he said after a while. “Every one of us—every billionaire and even millionaire—has the means to make the world markedly better. And yet... most don’t. We have more than we could ever want, never mind need, and yet we keep pushing for more, more, more on the backs of people who don’t have enough. When does it end?”

Geri chewed her lip. “So you just... kill us until there aren’t any left?”

“Seems to be the philosophy of your clientele.”

She winced. Not long ago, she’d have argued and shut him right down. But she was too exhausted and overwhelmed to think. “How do you live with being the villain?”

He huffed a laugh. “I could ask you the same thing.”

She pressed her lips together, hating how little she could gainsay him. How bright and loud the projections on her hotel room wall echoed inside her mind right now.

Beside her, Rich shifted his weight. “There was a mass shooting in your hometown a few weeks before you came here. The shooter was killed before he reached a more crowded area. Shot by a bystander carrying a gun.” He paused. “Do you believe the bystander was the villain in that story?”

“That’s not the same,” she snapped. “The shooter was actively killing people, and he was looking for more victims. And the bystander was a potential victim, too—it was self-defense.”

“Even if he wasn’t in danger himself, I don’t think many would argue that his decision to take that shot was unjustified.”

Geri gritted her teeth. “So that’s how you see yourself? As someone taking out a mass shooter?”

“Something like that.” Rich gazed out the window with unfocused eyes. “I read a lot of fantasy when I was growing up. There were a lot of dragons in those books, each sitting on mountains of wealth, and the hero was always the knight who slayed the dragon.” He turned to at her again. “People like us—we were raised to see ourselves as kings and queens, but the reality is that we’re the dragons. We’re the creatures sitting on hoards of wealth in between terrorizing the townspeople who are already starving.”

Geri pursed her lips as she considered that. “So... kings and queens after all.”

He studied her.

She shifted her attention back to the island beneath them because she couldn’t handle his scrutiny. “The kings and queens live in palaces surrounded by wealth. The townspeople starve.” She swallowed. “And the kings and queens send them into battle to die for more territory, more gold, more power...” Exhaling, she closed her eyes.

“You do understand, don’t you?”

She looked at him, and an odd smile curled his lips. “I...” The rest of the thought stuck in her throat. She wanted to say she didn’t understand killing the kings and queens, but if the kings and queens were more like the dragon than they were the townspeople, then why wouldn’t the townspeople want them slain? It was self-preservation. Survival.

Justice.

Geri shifted her gaze to the window again, and for a long moment, they stared outside in silence. She wondered what he saw out there. What this island and the vast ocean brought to mind for him. What he'd seen that had driven him to systematically—and often sadistically—taking out the people in the social class to which he himself belonged.

She swept her tongue across her dry lips and watched his reflection from the corner of her eye. “What did your father do?”

Rich's expression shifted to something closer to his game show host smile. “The same thing everyone like us did. He was born into money, and he exploited tens of thousands of people until he had even more money.” He pushed out a breath. “My father believed in growth. Endless, infinite growth. Whatever one had, there could always be more. It could always be bigger.”

Geri nodded numbly. She'd heard her own father talk about that as well. Growth. Expansion. More. Always more .

“Endless growth for the sake of growth is the mindset of a cancer cell,” Rich said. “If it's not stopped, it eventually kills everything. So rather than being a part of the cancer, I've decided to be part of the cure.”

She suppressed a shudder and she wasn't even sure why. “You didn't answer my question.”

“Didn't I?”

She studied him. “What did he—what did he do? What business?”

“Every cancer starts somewhere,” he said. “But every cancer kills just the same in the end.” Then he turned to go.

She watched over her shoulder, and he was almost to the boardroom door when she called after him, “Mr. Price?”

He turned around, eyebrows up and an odd grin still on his lips.

She swallowed as she faced him fully. “Did you kill him?”

“My father?”

She nodded.

His eyes lost focus as his expression turned thoughtful. After a moment, he shook his head. “Sometimes I wish I had. And that I’d done it much sooner. Fewer people would have suffered in the name of lining his pockets. On the other hand, I only had my epiphany a few months after he died. If he’d gone sooner, I wouldn’t have had the experiences that paved the way for me to see the truth.” He quirked his lips, then shrugged. “I’m only grateful I had that epiphany one way or the other. I can’t change the past, but I can redirect the future.”

With that, he continued out the door, leaving Geri alone in the empty, bloody boardroom.

Heart thumping, she faced the windows again, gazing out at the most beautiful prison in the world. Shame and regret were anchor chains around her neck. The physical soreness from the hard labor, the beating, and the lack of sleep were dull aches compared to what tore apart her mind. The sun hadn’t burned her skin as badly as the truth blistered her conscience and her soul.

Rich had shown her things she couldn’t unsee. She couldn’t even dismiss it as a psycho killer trying to gaslight her into believing he wasn’t evil. He made no apologies for what he did, but he’d also forced her to see the blood on her own hands.

And now that he'd made her look, she couldn't look away. She couldn't talk it into something palatable and patriotic with the usual bland corporate buzzwords. The images were seared into her brain; if she ever slept again, she'd be seeing everything from her hotel room's walls every night for the rest of her life.

All because of Rich Price.

A gun-wielding madman or an errant missile didn't terrify her the way that man did. He wasn't just a deranged serial killer who believed he was justified in committing his murders. He didn't have some warped delusion convincing him that he was doing God's work or that the innocent people he killed deserved it somehow.

No, he was arguably as sane as anyone Geri had met. He'd thought this through. Planned and executed (literally). Believed to his core that the world became a better place each time he killed.

But the most disturbing thing wasn't that he believed, rationally and sanely, that what he was doing was good and righteous.

It was that, more and more...

Geri couldn't disagree.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Their captors were relentless. The day after Kit was killed, everyone was back out on the beach, this time at a rocky section. They carried, rolled, and otherwise hauled heavy rocks from one pile to another about a hundred feet away. When the first pile was gone, they carried, rolled, and otherwise hauled the rocks back over.

Fingers bled. Ankles rolled. Backs hunched. Skin burned.

Quinn vacillated between wishing they'd get called into the boardroom, and embracing this miserable hard labor because at least it wasn't psychological torture followed by horrific murder. He had no doubt they'd get back to that part before long.

He glanced out at the ocean for the millionth time and debated just making a run for it. The men would undoubtedly shoot him in the back and leave him to be eaten by sharks. Were there sharks out here? Probably. That would be quicker than drowning, wouldn't it? Or maybe he'd be bitten by a shark, and then he'd be left to bleed out and drown at the same time.

Okay. Maybe running for the water was a bad idea.

And anyway, the men would just haul him back, beat the shit out of him again, and then put a shovel in his hand. All flowcharts led to him dying; it was just a question of how painfully and how protracted.

So for now, he kept pushing rocks across sand. What little hope he still had dwindled by the hour. From the vacant, zombielike expressions on everyone else's faces, he wasn't alone in that regard.

While they drank water in the shade during one of their too-short breaks, he surreptitiously watched Geri. She hadn't said a word to anyone today. Yesterday, after they'd all been dismissed from the boardroom, she'd stayed behind. When she'd come down to the lobby, she'd been distant and quiet.

Had something happened after they'd all left?

But he didn't have a chance to ask. They were worked until they could barely stand, fed a meager meal, and dismissed for the night. When Quinn went out to vape, Geri wasn't there. By the time he came back into the restaurant, there was no one left at all except for Elena and Dan, who were drinking in silence as they both stared off into space with vacant eyes.

Quinn didn't acknowledge them and they didn't acknowledge him. He went to the elevator and up to his suite, where he debated taking one of his precious remaining pills from Art Keller. In the end, he left it in its hiding place in the bathroom, and when he went to bed, sheer exhaustion knocked him out despite the noise and projections all around him. Though horrific nightmares haunted his sleep, he managed a few hours of... maybe "rest" was too generous a word for it, but it was something.

The next morning was more of the same. They all ate in silence in the hot, humid restaurant. Everyone's eyes were blank and distant, as if each person were traumatized right up into their own heads just like Quinn. Geri did seem to be less distant than she'd been yesterday, and she even came out and smoked with Quinn after breakfast, but she didn't say much. Neither did he.

Rich didn't make an appearance. For three days, no one was summoned to the boardroom. Each time they were sent out to the beach instead of upstairs, Quinn's guts churned with a mix of relief and dread. No boardroom challenge resulting in a grisly execution... but also no escape from a day of hard labor.

On the fourth day, though, when they reached the shoreline, there were no piles of sand or rocks.

Instead, standing in a semicircle with several feet between each were eight cylindrical contraptions that reminded him dunk tanks he'd seen at charity events. He'd even been in a few before, and getting dunked was usually refreshing at a hot outdoor event. In today's thick heat, dropping into that water would probably feel amazing.

But the last thing Quinn wanted to do was get into one of those tanks, which were empty at the moment. There was no way this was a harmless, silly game like throwing baseballs at a target and then, to everyone's amusement, knocking someone into the water.

They're going to put in piranhas, aren't they? Quinn suppressed a groan. Sea snakes, maybe? Very small but ill-tempered eels?

An Irukandji jellyfish so they could die like Art did?

Oh God. This was going to suck one way or the other.

Unsurprisingly, they were each ordered into a tank, and menacing black rifles dared them to disobey. Quinn was terrified of drowning, so he considered refusing just so they'd shoot him instead.

But the memory of Lynette's slow, awful death had him getting into the tank despite his fear. He might escape this without drowning. If he resisted and took a bullet, he knew without a doubt it would be someplace painful that wouldn't kill him quickly.

So... he'd take his chances in the tank.

Tyson followed him in, which was cramped as all hell because the tanks were tall and

narrow, but Quinn didn't dare do or say anything. The guy clicked a thick metal cuff around Quinn's left ankle, and then attached it to a short chain welded to the bottom of the tank. After Tyson stepped out and closed the small hatch, water began to pour in. Cold water.

Quinn tugged at the chain. Fuck. He wasn't going anywhere. Not that he expected to, given that the hatch was locked from the outside.

When the water stopped, there were no piranhas, sea snakes, or eels. There wasn't even a bar to sit on—everyone just stood in the waist-high water. Kevin and Tyson checked each tank and added or drained water from some. When they got to Quinn's, they added until it was flush with the waistband of his shorts.

Making sure everyone was in to the same relative depth, he guessed.

Making it fair.

He shivered, both with dread and with cold, because the water wasn't exactly warm. His skin and muscles ached, and he was already starting to lose feeling in his toes.

Oh yeah. This was going to be fun .

He curled and uncurled his toes and bent and straightened his knees, trying to keep the blood circulating. That was easier said than done with his left leg—he had to lower himself deeper into the icy water to bend his knee—but what else could he do? He didn't even know if it was helping, but it seemed better than just standing there. From the way his competitors were moving inside their tanks, they were doing something similar.

It struck him that no one was pounding in the glass or trying to climb out. No one was thrashing or shouting. No chains were rattling, at least not that he could hear.

Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe it was despair.

Maybe they were all just resigned to the fact there was no escape.

What Quinn wouldn't have given for that innate human survival instinct to get lost so he could end it all quickly and painlessly. Because that was probably the only way he would die quickly and painlessly, and he'd long since lost hope that he was getting out of this alive.

You broke us all, Price. You've made your point.

Just kill us already and be done with it .

The ache in Quinn's lower extremities was inching toward unbearable when Rich came strolling down to the beach in khaki pants, a white button down, and dark sunglasses. He looked like a douchey prep school kid going to a beach party, not a fucking psycho who was happily torturing his captives.

"Welcome to the tank challenge," he announced. "Is everyone comfortable? Can I get anyone a drink?"

You can drink shit, asshole, Quinn thought, but he didn't dare say it out loud.

Evidently done teasing his waterlogged captives, Rich got started with the challenge. "You've all risen to wealth and power through sociopolitical oppression and death. I think we've made that abundantly clear. But"—he held up a finger—"you've also withdrawn more than your fair share from the planet we all live on. So for today's challenge, we're going to see whose carbon footprint is the most damaging."

The rumble of a diesel engine made Quinn's neck prickle. A moment later, a flatbed truck appeared carrying two large plastic barrels. It backed in between two of the

tanks. Additional trucks arrived until there was one between each pair. Rich's cronies climbed onto the beds, shovels in hand.

"Oh, fuck," Quinn breathed.

In another tank, Kyle crossed himself. Quinn wasn't even religious, but he did the same anyway.

"We've run the numbers," Rich announced, "and determined who among you is responsible for the greatest carbon emissions. And we've further adjusted those numbers proportionately to your height and weight relative to the tank you're in and the volume of water."

Quinn stared down at the water, its surface rippling gently as if this wasn't an icy deathtrap.

"So," Rich said. "Why don't we see who had the biggest impact?"

"If you know who it is," Kyle called out, "why not just say so and be done with it?"

Rich turned to him, and though Quinn couldn't see his face, he could imagine the sinister smile. "I prefer to send a message, Mr. Aimes. Maybe when some of you realize just how much of an impact you're having, you'll—"

"What difference does it make?" Paul called out. "You're going to kill us all instead of letting us go home to make any changes!"

"Correction, Mr. O'Connor." Rich turned toward Paul, bringing him and that awful smile into profile. "I'm going to kill all but one of you." He shrugged. "I have to make sure I leave an impression on the lone survivor."

Quinn closed his eyes and gulped. They were going to drown someone. Right here on this beach in one of these tanks. And it might be him.

He shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cold water.

I should've let them shoot me.

Hell, he'd probably be dead by now if he had.

"Oh, and before we begin," Rich said, sounding like he was enjoying the fuck out of this. "Some of you might find the materials dropped into your tank... familiar."

Quinn exchanged puzzled glances with Kyle and Alan, who were across from him. What did that even mean? Did they want to know?

Rich gestured at the men on the flatbeds. "Let's start with private jet usage."

The men on the trailers dug their shovels in the barrels, then overturned them above the tanks. Sand rained down into Quinn's, landing on him and raining into the water around him. A second scoop came, and when he shook it off and ducked out of the way, the sand fell to the bottom of the tank. When he took a step, it crunched and ground beneath his shoes.

Thank God I'm not barefoot.

Someone squawked in horror. Someone else shouted.

When Quinn got some of the grit out of his eyes and peered across the semicircle, he saw Paul brushing sand off as well, the water around him turning a cloudy brown.

But Dan and Alan's water was turning black. When another shovelful rained down on

Alan, it was pure black. He coughed and sputtered, fighting against the chain and trying in vain to bat away the dust hanging in the air.

Coal. Christ, that was ground up coal .

Rich smirked at Kyle. “I hope you’ve paid attention to how they clean animals after oil spills, Mr. Aimes. You’re probably going to need it after this. Well, if ‘after this’ is still an issue for you.”

Quinn craned his neck to see through the glass, and he realized Kyle’s tank was also turning black. Kyle wiped frantically at black sludge on his skin and clothes as he gagged and groaned.

Oil.

And Dan was in the same predicament as Kyle, trying in vain to wipe off oil.

Quinn shuddered. Sand was awful, but oil? Coal slurry? Those sounded like their own special circles of hell.

Not that sand was a picnic. As more was added, it packed in around his legs like concrete. The grit chewed at his battered and sunburned skin.

And the water kept climbing. It was halfway up his chest now. His heart pounded with terror as he yanked at the chain holding his ankle. His legs were deep in sand now and he could hardly move them, but it didn’t matter anyway because that chain was not going to give.

He was going to drown, wasn’t he? In gritty, sandy, cold water in a fucking tank on a beach in the middle of—

“Stop! Please!” Alan screamed. “You’ve made your point! Please!”

Quinn craned his neck, and his stomach flipped. Alan was just barely keeping his chin above the black slurry. He had his arms upraised, maybe to reduce the displacement so he could still breathe.

“I believe a number of scientists, politicians, and environmental groups have made similar pleas to your companies,” Rich said. “In fact—let’s give these oligarchs a taste of how many waterways and wetlands their companies have destroyed.”

More sand dumped into Quinn’s tank, and the water inched upward. Memories of that development of mansions built by conscripted homeless people tumbled through his mind... along with the wetlands he knew for a fact had been damaged.

“I hope Mr. Aimes and Mr. Robinson know how to tread water,” Rich said as another shovelful of black dust was dropped into Alan’s tank. Alan choked and spat out powder, flailing his arms as the sludge sloshed against the sides of the tank.

“Enough! Enough!” He was sobbing and choking now. “Please! Enough!”

“No more!” Kyle shouted. “Please!”

But the men shoveled in even more, making Alan and Kyle scream with terror. When Alan’s screams turned to muted sputtering, Quinn’s stomach dropped. He squinted through the dust. Dirty black hand-shaped smears showed where Alan had clawed at the glass, desperate for escape. His nose and forehead were just visible, and he spat black water and choked.

Quinn’s heart thundered against his ribs. The water in his tank was at his collarbone, the sand the only thing keeping his numb legs from buckling, but Alan—Christ, if any more was added to his tank, he was a dead man.

“Enough!” That was Paul this time, and he banged his fist against the glass. “Enough! Let them out for God’s sake!”

Geri joined in. Then Elena. Charlie. When Quinn got his teeth to stop chattering, he added his voice to the chorus, begging for mercy for all of them, but especially for Alan and likely Kyle, too. Would Rich let both of them drown? Kill two of them in one challenge? And what about Dan? He was a petroleum tycoon, and—God, one glance confirmed that he too was struggling not to be overcome by the black sludge.

Like the others, Quinn kept pounding a numb fist against the side of his tank and pleading with Rich and his men to stop.

Over the shouts, Rich taunted, “Remember, contestants—this represents the carbon emissions and environmental damage you are responsible for.” He laughed. “Rising oceans and polluted water aren’t such abstract thoughts anymore, are they?” Then he gestured at the men on the flatbed. “Is that all for damaged waterways and wetlands?”

“Almost, boss.” The man beside Alan’s tank dug his shovel into the barrel, reaching almost all the way to the bottom. It must’ve been nearly empty by this point. Still, he was able to withdraw a heaping shovelful of black dust, and he dumped it into the tank—right over Alan’s face.

Quinn gasped. Alan’s fighting and flailing became full-on thrashing. The thick, black water sloshed and churned with his struggles, but he wasn’t shouting anymore. He was obviously trying to, but the only sounds that emerged were strangled and muffled as he choked on the vile substance.

Quinn couldn’t even breathe as he watched. Alan was drowning now. Or suffocating. Asphyxiating? One way or the other, he wasn’t getting enough air past the dust and water and slurry, and Quinn’s own throat tightened as the man’s thrashes weakened. Once in a while, Alan would manage to surface long enough to suck in air, just to

cough and choke some more. He might've even vomited at this point, but the only liquid Quinn could see was black.

Each time Alan surfaced, Quinn wanted to shout at him to just stay under. Rich was going to let him die. That was obvious now. And every time Alan managed to suck in some air, even when he ended up coughing most of it out, it just served to prolong his struggles.

Those breaths became fewer and farther between. The movements of Alan's arms were slower. More sluggish. Heavier. The thick black liquid wasn't churning as violently now.

He made a final grab for the side of the tank, desperately seeking purchase, but both hands slid downward, leaving macabre tracks as he sank deeper into the sludge, having apparently lost consciousness.

Quinn looked away, trying not to add vomit to his own too-full tank.

Eventually, Alan's tank stilled, the water calm on top. From Quinn's vantage point, the only sign of Alan at all was one arm floating motionless at the top, the skin stained so gray he looked like he'd been dead for days.

"Well." Rich scanned the group, grinning. "It looks like we have a loser. I'll see you all in the boardroom tomorrow morning."

And with that, he walked away.

The remaining men kicked the barrels off the flatbeds and onto the sand. Then they jumped down onto the ground and started releasing the hatches on each tank. When Quinn's was opened, he almost wept with relief as the water began rushing out. Even more when something shifted beneath his feet, and he realized the chain attached to

his ankle was no longer holding him to the bottom of the tank.

Arms and legs numb, he managed to climb out of the sand and stumble out to safety. The shackle was still around his ankle, the chain still attached to the small plate, which had been released from the tank's floor. Fine. Whatever. He was as free as he probably ever would be again.

Several feet away, Kyle was on his hands and knees, surrounded in black oil with even more of it clinging to his skin, clothes, and hair. He was sobbing and shaking and puking as he tried and failed to wipe it all away. Dan was in a similar state, leaning hard on Elena as he threw up black liquid.

And Alan...

Fuck.

The rush of thick coal-water had pulled him partway out of the tank, and he was slumped over onto the sand, coated in black and motionless. His wedding ring peeked out of the mess and glinted in the tropical sun. His face was so caked in mud it was unrecognizable.

At Tyson's instruction, a couple of the men picked up Alan's body and heaved him onto one of the flatbeds. They let him land like a wet ragdoll and made no effort to position him with any kind of respect or care.

Then the truck rumbled away, and that was the last anyone saw of Alan Robinson.

Everyone exchanged shell-shocked looks. Quinn was relieved to see Geri alive and well. She was rattled and shivering, but all things considered, she was all right. Charlie pointedly did not look at Dan and Elena, who were quietly comforting each other. Paul paced shakily on the sand, his chain rattling and clanging with every

shuffling step.

As a group, they looked like they'd survived a shipwreck. Wet. Dirty. Trembling. Visibly traumatized.

"All right," Tyson barked. "Time to get to work."

Everyone turned to him.

"Get to work?" Dan asked, stroking Elena's wet hair. "After what we just—"

"You've all done enough damage without leaving this beach a disaster." Tyson pointed with a shovel at the mess of oil, coal, and other substances Quinn didn't want to identify. "None of you are going anywhere as long as it looks like this." He tossed a shovel at Charlie as he told them all, "I want every grain of contaminated sand off this beach and into those barrels."

The group stared at him, a mix of horror and disbelief in their expressions.

"But..." Paul pointed down plate still attached to his ankle. "What about..."

"You'll be fine. Get to work."

Tyson wasn't joking; he and the other men made no move to take the shackles off anyone's ankles. As everyone moved, the chains and plates banged against their feet and legs. Quinn's felt bruised all to shit. Charlie, Dan, and Geri all had blood trickling down their calves and ankles.

Elena wept softly as she shoveled oil-soaked sand. Quinn thought Paul was crying too. And he caught Dan wiping his eyes a few times. Geri had streaks cutting through the dirt on her face. Kyle was still sniffing.

Quinn distinctly remembered a time in his life when he would've ribbed the men for being so emotional.

Today, he just wiped away his own tears and kept shoveling.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Exhaustion made sure Geri slept right through the heat, the pain, and the horrific projections. One of those precious pills from Art sealed the deal.

If Rich was worried she wasn't getting the full effect of the things he had playing on her walls and through the speakers, he didn't need to be. Her nightmares made sure that even while she was asleep, she didn't forget why she was here.

The shower was painful, the lukewarm water lighting up every scratch, scrape, and sunburn. Drying off was an exercise in carefully dabbing at tender skin, just barely touching it with the rough towel to absorb the water without pissing off the nerve endings.

As she was getting dressed, she caught her own reflection in the mirror, and she stared.

Her cheeks were gaunt, her eyes sunken. The sun and the heat had left her lips painfully chapped. Her sunbaked skin was a deep salmon color in some places, a dark tan in others. She could almost hear her mother tsking over sun damage and how she'd have spots and wrinkles later in life, not to mention cancer. Her sister would be telling her how murderously jealous she was that she had to pay thousands to replicate the things the sun naturally did to Geri's hair.

The thought brought tears to her eyes, and she covered her mouth as she tried not to break down. In that moment, she'd have given anything to listen to her mom lecture her about skincare. She'd have sawed off a limb to hear Annette talking about how much more even her tan would be if she came along to a tanning salon or spent some time laying out on the beach. Even her sister's petulant whining about losing the

genetic lottery while the sun bestowed flawless natural highlights on Geri—that would all be music to her ears right now.

What would happen to them if Geri didn't make it home? Rich had made it clear he intended to take out the people who'd built their mountains of wealth, and he'd follow that money from heir to heir until someone finally reconnected with their humanity. The thought of her mother or sister enduring this torture made her sick to her stomach.

She was so exhausted and full of despair, she wanted to crumble to the floor, and filled with a resilient drive to survive this. To win this competition so she could go home and spare the people she loved from the hell she'd been enduring for... for... however long she'd been on this purgatorial island.

"I'm going to survive," she croaked to her reflection. "I'm going to fucking win."

Winning means everyone else dies. Everyone but you. You have to beat them and let them all die horrible deaths so you can win.

But losing means my family suffers and dies too.

I have to fucking win.

She didn't know how. She didn't even know if Rich would make good on sending one of them home alive.

But she had to try.

The remaining players were, unsurprisingly, summoned back to the boardroom. Geri joined the others in the bloody room, and there they waited for Rich to show up and tell them how they'd be traumatized all to hell today.

Tyson stood beside the door, silent and stoic as ever. No Rich. No Kevin. No instructions.

After a while, Kyle sat up. “We’re missing a couple of people.”

Geri looked around. Sure enough, Alan’s chair wasn’t the only one newly vacant this morning. Her rattled brain took a second to catch up and figure out who, but Charlie Simmons was faster.

“That slut,” he growled. “She and Woolman are probably screwing again.” He gave a haughty sniff. “I hope Price makes an example of them.”

That earned him disgusted glares from everyone present.

Geri shook her head and avoided looking at him. Charlie was exactly the kind of man her mother had always warned her against marrying—possessive and controlling even after cheating and leaving. He was also exactly the kind of man her father had always introduced her to in hopes of marrying because it would be “good for the family” and “good for business.”

And everyone wondered how she was forty-three and still single.

The boardroom door opened, and Geri braced. Rich was on his way in with a new torturous game, wasn’t he?

Except it wasn’t Rich.

Kevin leaned in and whispered something to Tyson, who swore under his breath before following Kevin out of the room. The door swung shut behind them, and Geri and the others looked at each other, confusion and alarm written all over their faces.

That was... unusual.

“Do you think they made a run for it?” Paul asked.

Charlie made a derisive sound. “Elena would rather stay here and die than voluntarily go out there.” He gestured toward the jungled end of the island. “She’s not going anywhere without a driver and a—”

“Charlie,” Quinn said flatly. “Shut up.”

Geri had to bite back a laugh, both at Quinn’s comment and Charlie’s obvious offense to the same. Charlie did shut up, though.

A solid twenty minutes after Tyson left with Kevin, the door opened again.

Dan walked in, his face pale and his eyes wide with shock. Alarm ratcheted up in Geri; he’d been a shell-shocked mess after the tank challenge, same as the rest of them, but now he was shaken in a way she couldn’t figure out.

“Dan?” Quinn asked. “You okay?”

Dan swallowed. He stared at Quinn, then let his gaze drift around the room. When he finally spoke, his voice was brittle and raw: “Elena’s dead.”

Everyone gasped and murmured—except for Charlie.

“You did this!” He flew across the table at Dan, almost stumbling on the slick surface before he grabbed Dan’s shirt and throat, both of them toppling to the floor. “You killed her! You did it! You—”

“I didn’t kill her!” Dan cried as they grappled on the bloodstained carpet. “I

didn't—Charlie, calm down!" He managed to overpower the man enough to get him into a headlock, and they were both still, if panting and shaking. "Calm down," he said again. "I did not kill her."

"She's dead because of you!" Charlie gritted out, his face turning purple. "You were with her!"

"I didn't kill her," Dan growled. "She was—"

Charlie roared and shoved an elbow back into Dan's midsection. Dan grunted, loosening his grip enough for Charlie to wrench free. Once again, they were fighting, fists flying as Quinn and Paul tried to haul them apart.

Quinn managed to get a handful of Charlie's shirt, and he twisted it as he grabbed Charlie's arm. Paul got an arm around Dan, and they dragged the two men away from each other.

Geri stepped in between them, a hand on each of their chests. "Enough," she snapped. "Both of you."

The men stilled, though they were clearly not done.

Geri kept her hand on Charlie's chest to hold him back and turned to Dan. "What happened to Elena?"

Dan winced, wiping blood from his nose with a trembling hand. "I don't know. We went to bed last night"—he flicked his eyes toward Charlie as if expecting him to lunge for him—"and this morning... she was gone. Just... gone."

"She died in her sleep?" Paul asked.

Shaking his head, Dan swallowed hard. “We both had some pills left from Art Keller. And when I looked, her stash was empty. She should’ve had enough to last at least a few more days. I think...” He grimaced. “I think she took them all.”

Charlie made a miserable, pained sound, and he sank onto the edge of the table. “Oh God. Ellie.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Dan snarled. “You hated her. You’ve hated her ever since—”

“You know nothing!” Charlie threw back. “And wouldn’t your wife like to know you’ve been screwing another man’s wife while—”

“She’s not your wife, you fucking oxygen thief! You left her! She doesn’t belong to you!”

Charlie roared with fury, shoved Geri aside, and lunged at Dan.

Paul and Quinn again tried to separate them, and Kyle touched Geri’s shoulder. “You all right?”

She nodded and accepted his help getting to her feet.

The two men were brawling furiously now, slamming each other around and throwing fists as Paul and Quinn tried to get in between.

Charlie got his hands around Dan’s throat, and Dan levered himself up and threw them both back.

Paul and Quinn darted out of the way... leaving them a clear path to crash right into the table.

Dan slammed Charlie against the edge, and Charlie cried out in pain as he released Dan's throat. Dan seized the opportunity, grabbed the front of Charlie's shirt, and swung him around before letting him go. Momentum carried Charlie into one of the windows. He slammed his head against the glass before crumpling to his knees, stunned.

Dan watched him, breathing hard as blood trickled from his nose and the corner of his mouth.

Geri held her breath, glancing at the others who seemed to be doing the same, as if they were all wondering if Charlie would back down or if Dan would finish him off.

Charlie pulled himself upright, and when he glared at Dan, this clearly wasn't over.

"Charlie," Kyle said. "Buddy, you need to stop. We're in this together, okay? We can't—"

"I'm not in anything together with this son of a bitch," Charlie growled, and then he came at Dan again. He staggered a little, but caught himself.

Dan pushed off the table and threw a fist into Charlie's face.

The impact sent Charlie spinning, then toppling, and he landed hard on his back, his skull hitting the floor with a loud crack .

Charlie stilled.

"Oh, shit," Dan whispered, dropping to his knees beside Charlie. He shook the man's shoulder. "Come on, Charlie. Wake up."

Kyle and Geri joined him. Charlie was still breathing. His pulse was still strong.

Blood was pooling behind his head, though.

“What do we do?” Kyle asked. “Because I don’t think they’ll airlift him to a hospital or—”

Charlie arched between them, his entire body wracked by a violent convulsion.

“Put him on his side!” Paul said. “Put him on his side so if he throws up, he doesn’t aspirate!”

Geri and Dan grabbed Charlie and tried to roll him, which was a challenge while he was seizing.

“He needs a hospital,” Dan said. “Fucking hell, he needs—”

“How the hell do we get him to a hospital?” Quinn snapped. “Even if Rich and his thugs would take him to one, we’re hours away from anything.”

“It’s worth a shot!” Paul got up and sprinted for the door. “I’ll get help!”

Geri exchanged glances with Quinn and Dan. Their grim expressions matched what she felt; the odds of anyone getting Charlie someplace that could help him were slim at best to start with. The odds of RightPriceTek actually helping him get somewhere?

Charlie stopped seizing, but he was unconscious. No one could rouse him. Quinn offered his shirt to stanch the bleeding, and Dan and Geri kept Charlie on his side so he didn’t aspirate.

The convulsions started again. Dan and Geri didn’t try to hold him still, but they at least tried to keep him from flopping onto his back.

He was settling down again when the doors opened, and in walked Tyson with Paul on his heels. “What the fuck happened here?”

“He attacked me,” Dan said quickly. “I... I wasn’t trying to hurt him, just stop him from—”

Tyson shoved Dan out of the way, sending him into Quinn, who helped to steady him. Tyson scowled down at Charlie, who was still twitching as blood ran from his mouth. He must’ve bitten his tongue during the convulsions.

He pulled open one of Charlie’s eyes. Then the other. Checked his pulse. Did something to his throat—checking to see if he protected his airway, maybe? Geri wasn’t sure.

Right then, Kevin strolled into the room. He peered down at Charlie. “How bad?”

“He’s not dead yet.” Tyson pushed himself to his feet. “But I doubt there’s anyone behind the wheel anymore.”

Geri stared at him. Yeah, she could believe that Charlie was probably brain-dead, but did he have to be quite such a dick about it?

Then she remembered who he was, who he worked for, why they were all here...

God, it was a wonder he hadn’t come in and just shot Charlie through the head without bothering to check for signs of life.

Maybe they wanted him to survive so they could torture and execute him.

She shuddered, cold sweat like slime on her neck and back.

“All of you,” Kevin ordered. “Down to the beach. The boss will decide what happens next.”

Dan paled. ““What happens next’? I—look, I didn’t kill Elena. And this”—he flailed a hand at Charlie—“was a fucking accident. I didn’t—”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Kevin gestured at the door. “Down to the beach. Now.”

Everyone glanced at each other, confusion and terror written on their faces.

“Now!” Kevin barked.

They all got up and hurried toward the elevator, leaving Charlie with Kevin and Tyson.

As they rode down, no one said a word.

What was there to say?

Elena was dead.

Charlie was dying.

And they were all still at the mercy of Rich Price.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

All day long, they shoveled sand in miserable silence. That night, as the dwindling group ate in the restaurant, Dan looked utterly defeated and broken. His face was battered, and his eyes were vacant.

The meal was silent, which was no surprise. Every time Quinn made eye contact with someone, he could see the elephant in the room that no one wanted to acknowledge.

Dan had killed Charlie. It was self-defense, sure. And Charlie had arguably died quicker than anyone else whose blood had stained the boardroom carpet.

But still. Dan had woken up beside Elena's dead body, and then he'd killed Charlie defending himself.

Even if one of the people at this table somehow survived this ordeal, it didn't seem possible that one person could ever live long enough to get all the therapy they would need to come back. And Dan was arguably even more deeply traumatized than anyone else.

Rich had clearly wanted to break them all and punish them for sins they been obviously committing. He'd succeeded a long time ago. Now this whole thing just felt like a cat toying with the mouse whose neck was already in the trap. They were long past any kind of karmic justice; their captor just enjoyed listening to them squeak.

Quinn didn't taste much of his food. He wasn't even sure how he managed to get it past his dry mouth and tight throat into the lead ball that was his stomach. About the only thing that drove him to try to eat at all was knowing how awful shoveling sand

or moving rocks would be if he didn't. His bones ached from today and from just thinking about whatever hard labor Rich and his minions would dream up for them next. Maybe digging up trees, carrying them fifty feet away, and replanting them? Cleaning the airstrip on their hands and knees with their fingernails? Climbing up the outside of the hotel and scraping off bird shit with their teeth?

Nothing would surprise him at this point.

After the meal, Geri and Quinn slipped out to the patio to smoke and vape. A guard was stationed by the railing they'd jumped over in their escape attempt, and another watched them closely, his finger curled around his rifle's trigger guard.

Nobody was running tonight. Sitting in the chairs at a table in the center of the patio, Geri and Quinn smoked in silence for long minutes.

Geri had just lit her second cigarette when she said, "I feel awful for Dan."

Quinn nodded, blowing out a cloud of vapor. "That's gotta be traumatic. Finding someone dead in your bed. Being accused of killing her." He shuddered. "Accidentally killing someone else in self-defense. I... can't even imagine what's going through his head."

Geri shook her head slowly. "I can't either. And I... I kind of envy him and Elena."

"How so?"

"Look at everything." She gestured around them. "We're isolated. We're being tortured. We're being threatened and systematically killed off." She brought her cigarette to her lips again. "But they still found something good, you know? Even if they were just fucking. Or just sleeping in the same bed. It's..." She waved the hand holding her cigarette. "Whatever they were doing, it had to be a bright spot in all this,

you know?”

Quinn’s throat tightened unexpectedly. He’d never been hard up for sex before, and he could nearly always find someone to share his bed. That wasn’t what he was missing right now, though. A kind human touch. Closeness. Intimacy. Something other than violence and hell... “Yeah,” he croaked. “I envy them too.” He sucked in some more vapor and blew it out. “Now she’s gone and he’s still here. That has to be rough.”

“Seriously,” she muttered, and took another drag. “And he has to sleep alone in the same bed where she died.”

Quinn let his gaze drift up the tall triangular hotel. “You’d think they could find him another room.”

She laughed humorlessly. “If he asks for another room, Price will have him sleeping in the boardroom. Guaranteed.”

“Ugh.” Quinn shuddered. “Probably.”

They finished smoking in silence.

As he pocketed his vape pen, Quinn sighed. “We should get some sleep.”

“Yeah. We should.” Geri took one last drag off her cigarette. Then she put it out and dropped it in the ashtray.

In silence, they crossed the empty restaurant and the deserted lobby toward the elevator that would take them upstairs.

As they waited for the doors to open, Geri said, “I, um...” She hesitated. Then she

turned to him. “Please don’t take this as something suggestive. Because I couldn’t, um, do anything if I wanted to.” She gestured toward the elevator doors. “But I really don’t want to spend tonight alone.”

The request almost knocked Quinn’s knees out from under him. He was in a similar boat—sex wasn’t going to happen—but now that she’d said the words... fuck. Despite the heat, the thought of sleeping next to another person was like a whole fleet of rescue boats cresting the horizon.

“Yeah,” he said hollowly. “I’d rather not spend it alone either.”

She glanced around the lobby. “Do you think they’ll try to stop us?”

He shrugged, the gesture taking more work than it should have. “What are they going to do? Kill us?”

“Fair point. I’ll take the risk.”

“Me too.”

They got in the elevator and rode in silence up to their floor. Before joining her in her suite, he swung into his own to collect a few necessities. He wasn’t sure why. Clinging to the comforts of normal, maybe? Whatever.

At this point, he wasn’t questioning anything.

In her room, he and Geri went through the motions of getting ready for bed without saying a word. He didn’t even look at her. He was just... wrung out. Numb. Exhausted.

They split one of the few remaining sleeping pills Art had given them, clinked their

cups of water together in a somber toast, and swallowed the pills.

Duly drugged, they climbed into the massive bed. They kept the sheets and covers thrown off since the room was still an oven. As he settled onto the pillows, though, Quinn realized then that they hadn't figured out what their respective definitions were of "not sleeping alone." Especially in this awful heat, and with as sore and sunburned as they both were, keeping a foot or so between them made the most sense.

Before he could suggest that, though, Geri rolled toward him. Without thinking about it, he wrapped his arm around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

Everywhere their skin touched, his stung and perspired from the heat. The warmth of her body against his in this stuffy room made him uncomfortably hot. Bruises and scrapes lit up wherever their bodies made contact.

But he closed his eyes and held her firmly at his side. The physical discomfort was muted compared to the closeness of another person. Ever since they'd come to this island, they'd been subjected to more pain and fear than he could comprehend, and holding on to another human being soothed his battered soul in ways he couldn't begin to articulate.

Even as the walls and ceiling lit up with horrific footage and the speakers filled the room with grim narration, Quinn kept his eyes shut and Geri against him.

On some level, he wished they both did have the capacity for sex. He didn't even know if Geri would be into him, but he craved the intimacy. The ability to zero in on another person and physical pleasure while the rest of the world was locked outside.

Sleeping like this— trying to sleep like this—was the best he could offer and the most he could ask for. His mind and body were too beaten down for any kind of exertion, and he was too sore all over to enjoy anything either of them did.

So he held her. She held him.

This wouldn't save them. More and more, he was beginning to believe nothing would. They were going to die out here, one by one, in psychotically creative ways.

But tonight, he and Geri held on to each other.

She relaxed against him and fell into a pattern of slow, steady breathing. Little by little, the sedative mingled with days' worth of fatigue, and they steadily pulled him down into the depths of sleep.

If Quinn never again heard the words "let's begin your next challenge," it would be far, far too soon.

And yet, here they were, after another day of shoveling sand in the heat—sitting at the boardroom table, facing down another fucking challenge.

"Can't this wait?" Geri asked. "Two people died yesterday. Outside the game."

Rich turned to her. "Does your world stop to mourn your company's collateral damage?"

Geri pressed her lips together.

"That's what I thought. Moving on." He picked up the remote off the table. "First, I have a video for you all to watch."

Quinn gnawed the inside of his cheek. What he wouldn't have given for the video in question to be a dry, poorly-produced film about why they should invest in RightPriceTek.

The video began with security footage of a hallway. Quinn was pretty sure it was one of the halls here in the hotel, and that was confirmed when Elena and Dan appeared. He had his arm around her waist, and she was leaning heavily on him, weaving a little and stumbling. With him holding her up, they stumbled into one of the suites.

The camera switched to inside the suite—holy fuck, there were cameras in their suites?—where Dan eased Elena onto the bed. She was conscious, but seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep or passing out. Drunk? Exhausted? Sick from the sun and hard labor? It was hard to tell. Could've been all three.

Then... she stilled. Her arm had been draped over her stomach and fell limply by her side. Eyes closed, her head lolled, and... she didn't move. At all. Her chest was completely still.

Paul made a strangled sound. Geri put her hand to her lips.

They'd just watched Elena die. Holy fuck.

And as they continued watching in silent, paralyzed horror, Dan returned to the room. He didn't seem the least bit alarmed by Elena's condition. He touched her neck, then her wrist. Then he climbed onto the bed, undressed Elena's motionless body, and...

Quinn had to look away. He made no apologies for wondering if Dan had killed her—he was, after all, the last one to see her alive—but he hadn't expected Dan to fuck her corpse .

Dan slammed his fist down on the table. "This is fake! It's a lie!" He flailed his hand toward the screen on which he was still taking his sweet time with Elena's body. "I never touched her! I—we fucked, okay? Plenty of times? But not while—" His voice cracked, and his expression was a mix of horror and disgust. "I would never . Not while a woman is... Jesus Christ." He stared up at Rich and croaked, "What the fuck

is wrong with you people?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Kyle demanded. “Why the hell did you—”

“I didn’t!” Dan shouted. “I slept with her, but I didn’t...” He flailed his hand at the TV screen, and his anger died away into something closer to despair. “I would never.”

“Then what the hell is happening there?” Kyle asked. “Jesus, man. What the fuck were you—”

“I didn’t,” Dan said, almost whispering now. “Everything she and I did was consensual. That—I didn’t do that .”

“He’s right,” Rich said. “I won’t say he never touched her—we all know that isn’t true—but he didn’t kill her, and he didn’t have sex with her while she was unconscious or deceased.”

Dan exhaled, leaning back in his chair. Everyone else glanced at him, at Rich, at the screen.

Quinn’s innards twisted and knotted. Rich was planning something, and Quinn was sure it would somehow be even worse than thinking one among them had killed Elena and defiled her corpse.

“If law enforcement were to investigate the death of Elena Simmons,” Rich explained, “there is no shortage of circumstantial evidence pointing very decisively toward Mr. Woolman. He was the last to see her alive and the one to find her dead. He had the means to kill her. I’m sure a medical examiner would find ample evidence that he’d slept with her.”

Dan squirmed in obvious discomfort, his face still contorted with disgust.

“There’s also the motive, of course,” Rich said. “After all, that airtight prenuptial agreement with Mrs. Woolman includes a clause very clearly stating that the agreement is null and void in the event of adultery.”

Dan’s breath rushed out in a long whoosh as he sank deeper into his chair.

“Now, a video like this”—Rich nodded toward the screen—“wouldn’t be admissible as evidence in a criminal court. Neither party knew they were being recorded. There’s no chain of custody for the video itself. And hidden cameras in hotel rooms are, at least in the United States, illegal.” He paused as if giving something serious thought. “There’s also the part where a skilled analyst would eventually be able to determine that the footage is clearly fake.”

Everyone at the table stilled.

Rich smiled that wicked smile that meant he was about to reveal something awful. “You of all people should all know just how persuasive a video can be. After all, you saw the videos of yourselves conducting interviews and enthusiastically talking about appearing on my show.” He motioned toward the screen. “And yet, when presented with footage of someone committing the unthinkable, you turn on him without a second thought.”

The collective “oh fuck” was palpable in the air. Or maybe that was just Quinn’s heart sinking deeper and deeper into the pit of his stomach. Kyle offered a sheepish look to Dan, but Dan seemed to be fixated on Rich.

“Thanks to advances in AI technology,” Rich said, grinning as he gestured at Paul, “it’s easier than ever to create media representing anything and everything we can imagine.”

Paul made a choked sound and lost even more color than Dan had.

“And with that incredible media,” Rich went on, “the public can be convinced to believe anything we want them to. Including...” He nodded toward the screen.

Quinn’s blood turned cold, a feeling that had become all too familiar since he’d arrived on this island.

“Even if law enforcement can debunk them and the judicial system won’t accept them,” Rich said with a grin, “the public won’t forget them. Once the cat is out of the bag, it becomes a never-ending uphill battle to convince people the cat doesn’t exist. So.” He picked up the remote again. “Let me show you some of the things my people have created that are one click of a button away from being released to the public.”

Jesus fuck. Each video was harder to watch than the last. The first showed Geri in a meeting with the leaders of two enemies of the United States. It was impossible to hear what they were saying, but they were clearly negotiating. In the end, both sides signed some documents. Then they shook hands, everyone smiling broadly. After that, there were several clips of missiles being delivered to their respective militaries with Cole Industries plain to see on each weapon.

Paul, the man behind the AI tech curtain himself, was shown hanging out with a couple of other men, drinking and smoking. “These DoD idiots—they’re so in love with the idea of fancy tech, they want it on every government machine that’ll support it. I give it six months before we have every byte of data from every machine from the Pentagon on down.”

One of the other guys chuckled as he blew out some smoke. “We got buyers for that data yet?”

“Lined up around the block,” Paul said with a shit-eating grin.

The men on the screen laughed and high-fived as if they'd just figured out how to hack their university's grading system. Quinn had to remind himself this was a fake video, and no, Paul and his boys hadn't made a deal that would allow them to siphon military secrets into their own systems before auctioning them to the highest bidder.

Groaning, the real Paul put his face into his hands and exhaled.

"Your company does great work," Rich taunted. "Very convincing."

Paul just made a miserable sound.

The clips continued, and when Quinn saw himself on the screen, ice water trickled through his veins. He was at a high society party, chatting up a girl who was far, far too young. She might've been able to pass for fifteen, maybe sixteen, but Quinn knew her. She was the granddaughter of one of his father's colleagues, and she was barely fourteen.

The way he was talking to her and looking at her in the video... How close he was standing... How he kept touching her even as she was obviously getting nervous...

Quinn was genuinely surprised he hadn't thrown up. Maybe he just couldn't at this point.

Not even when the video version of himself put an arm around the girl's shoulders and led her away from the party.

Not when a grainy security camera watched them walking to and getting into his car.

Not when another security camera tracked them going into her parents' living room, onto her couch, and—

This time, Quinn did puke. He managed to turn away and direct it at the wall instead of onto Kyle's lap, but barely.

Thank God, by the time he looked up, the screen had changed. Now it was in the middle of a video showing both Dan and Kyle having a conversation with a group of environmental researchers.

Dan was in the middle of saying, "We'll provide enough funding for all three of your universities and your independent research." He held up a binder. "All we ask in return is that you don't publish this."

"We have a duty to publish it," one of the researchers insisted. "The situation is dire—if carbon emissions aren't reduced significantly in the next five years, we'll—"

"You'll destroy tens of thousands of jobs," Kyle broke in. "Do you understand the impact this will have on the economy?"

"To put it bluntly," the second researcher said, "the economy won't matter and neither will jobs if climate change gets any worse."

The video played for a few more minutes, showing the increasingly heated argument. Then Rich paused it.

"This footage is, of course, fake." He clicked the remote. "But this news story is not."

The screen changed to an article with the headline, *Investigators Suspect Foul Play in Deaths of Climate Scientists* .

Below that were photos of the three researchers who'd been in the video.

"Law enforcement doesn't have any leads at this time," Rich said. "But should

footage like this make it out into the public, well—I can only imagine the damage it would do to stock prices.”

Both Kyle and Dan looked like they were close to heaving just like Quinn had.

“Fortunately,” Rich continued, “none of these need to ever see the light of day.”

He clicked the remote emphatically, and the screen went black.

Everyone leaned in, staring at him and holding their breath.

Rich seemed to be enjoying their anxiety tremendously . “Quite simply,” he said with his usual smile, “how much is it worth to you to keep these videos out of the public eye?”

Quinn gulped. He thought some of the others did too.

Right then, the boardroom door opened, startling every one of them out of their seats.

It was just Tyson, though, carrying a small stack of tablets. As the rattled players sat back down, he walked around the table, distributing tablets to each person.

“Thank you, Tyson,” Rich said when the man was finished. Tyson nodded sharply and left without a word. To the people at the table, Rich said, “You’ll find the app when you turn on the tablets, and your answer will be a dollar figure.”

Dan cleared his throat. “Is this hypothetical? Or are we actually paying it to keep the videos in the dark?”

Rich smiled. “I guess you’ll find out, won’t you? But I would suggest approaching the challenge as if you’ll actually need to pony up the money.” He gestured with the

remote at the screen. “After all, the videos actually exist.”

Everyone exchanged terrified looks.

Rich kept smiling. “That will be all. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Embattled Billionaire Ex-Spouses Dead in Apparent Murder/Suicide

Elena Simmons, 40, said to be furious over bombshell allegations about her billionaire ex-husband Charlie's misdeeds, allegedly shot him late Wednesday evening before taking her own life. In recent weeks, sources disclosed that her husband, 58, had numerous mistresses during their volatile seventeen-year marriage and also hid tens of millions of dollars in assets during their contentious divorce. Elena was said to be "furious beyond words" and "completely done with his [expletive]."

The software tycoon and his ex-wife had been separated for five years, divorced for two, but continued to appear in gossip pages as they exchanged barbed comments and massive lawsuits.

An investigation is ongoing. Separate private services will be held for the spouses this weekend.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

“There has to be way out,” Dan whispered over the breakfast table. “I just—I can’t accept that we’re all going to sit here and wait to die.”

Paul poked at his slimy scrambled eggs. “If you’ve got any ideas, let’s hear ‘em.” He gestured with his fork at Quinn and Geri. “They’ve already tried to make a run for it. Quinn got his ass beat the second time.”

“And we’re all going to die if we just sit here,” Dan growled. “We have to do something .”

“They’ve got vehicles.” Kyle dragged his spoon back and forth through watery oatmeal. “I don’t... I don’t know where they’d take us, but at least they’d get us away from...” He circled his finger in the air to indicate their surroundings.

“That’s the problem,” Geri said. “We can get away from the hotel. But then we have to find a way off the island.”

Quinn pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. “Anyone pay attention during Gilligan’s Island reruns? Maybe they had some ideas.”

That sent a ripple of tired, halfhearted laughter through the group. Truthfully, there wasn’t much Geri wouldn’t try at this point, even if it was bonkers Hollywood nonsense. Trying to fashion a radar system out of coconuts and palm fronds beat the hell out of sitting here waiting to be systematically executed.

She shuddered at the memory of Alan screaming and panicking before he drowned in coal sludge during the tank challenge. Kit’s horrifying cries as the strychnine had

taken hold. Art's agony as he'd succumbed to the box jellyfish venom.

Eric and Lynette's deaths had both been long and painful, but compared to Alan, Kit, and Art...

God, it was just going to keep getting worse, wasn't it? Until they'd all died hellishly on this island?

She shivered and reached for her cold coffee.

All too soon, they were summoned back to the blood-scented boardroom, and Rich was in a cheerful mood. That never meant good things were going to happen.

"You may recall that in yesterday's challenge, everyone was asked to name a dollar figure to keep their respective video from being released to the public." He clicked the remote, and the flatscreen came on with the faces of the five remaining players. Beneath each photo were three blank slots—one blue, one green, and one red.

Geri squirmed in her chair. She couldn't begin to imagine how this was going to go, only that it would probably go badly. Very, very badly.

Should've known walking out yesterday was too good to be true.

Rich's smile made his eyes colder. "Let's have a look at how much you're all willing to pay to keep those videos from seeing the light of day."

The blue slots under each of their names changed from blank to showing dollar figures.

Quinn Hayworth - \$30 million

Geraldine Cole - \$50 million

Paul O'Connor - \$50 million

Kevin Aimes - \$75 million

Dan Woolman - \$100 million

Rich chuckled. "Looks like every one of you is highly motivated to keep those images out of the public eye."

Geri and the others fidgeted. She wondered if they were bracing like she was, sure the other shoe was about to drop and things were about to get very, very bad.

"Now," Rich went on, "at the very beginning of the competition, you were all asked to pledge a charitable donation to an organization of RightPriceTek's choosing. The person pledging the lowest amount was..." He craned his neck and peered at the dark stain where Eric Valentine's blood had spilled. "Well, I think you all remember how that game ended."

Geri swallowed bile. Fear was becoming far too familiar and a much too constant companion, and she didn't imagine that was going to improve any time soon.

Gesturing with the remote, Rich said, "Let's have a look at what you all pledged in that challenge." He clicked the button, and the green slots switched to numbers just like the blue ones had.

Quinn Hayworth - \$5 million

Geraldine Cole - \$20 million

Paul O'Connor - \$10 million

Kevin Aimes - \$10 million

Dan Woolman - \$10 million

Across from Geri, Dan made a choked sound that was almost a squeak, followed by a muttered, "Oh, fucking hell..."

"You're catching on to how these games work," Rich said. "Now let's compare the difference between what you were willing to contribute to organizations that help people you've harmed... and how much you'd spend to save your own skin."

The red slots populated:

Quinn Hayworth - \$25 million

Geraldine Cole - \$30 million

Paul O'Connor - \$40 million

Kevin Aimes - \$65 million

Dan Woolman - \$90 million

Geri felt guilty for the rush of relief that three other people had scored lower than she had. And she was glad Quinn was safe too.

Dan Woolman, though...

"Mr. Woolman," Rich said coldly. "What do these numbers say to you?"

Dan squirmed in his chair. “I... I didn’t know they’d be compared to each other, so—”

“Of course you didn’t,” Rich snapped. “But when asked to help out an organization versus saving your own ass...” He waved the remote at the screen. “Your priorities are abundantly clear.”

“No! No, it’s not like that at all!” Dan showed his palms. “I was scared! I was—if you want me to send more to a charity, hell, I’ll send that hundred million! But I was just panicked and—”

“More panicked about your own fate,” Rich said, “than you ever have been about the people who suffer and die in the name of increasing your profit margins.”

“No! No, I’m—”

“This concludes the challenge,” Rich growled over the top of him. “And I have just the punishment for you.” He paused and wrinkled his nose. “Not in here, though. This carpet’s been through enough.”

Geri’s heart jumped into her throat. What in the world did he have in mind for Dan?

Tyson and Kevin each grabbed one of Dan’s arms, and they didn’t even seem to notice him screaming and struggling as they dragged him out of the room.

Rich ordered everyone else to follow, and Geri did so without thought. She was too scared to disobey him; she knew to her core that would earn her the same fate as Dan, if not worse.

They were all led out to the beach, where Tyson and Kevin shoved Dan onto his knees. While Kevin held Dan’s arm, Tyson locked a pair of shackles around Dan’s

ankles, keeping his feet together.

Mark came out with a metal rod about five feet long, which he pounded into the sand behind Dan's back. Then Tyson shackled Dan's hands behind it, and finally, a chain around his neck kept his head against the rod.

He screamed and protested the entire time, but they just ignored him. By the time he was immobilized, he was sobbing and the front of his pants had a large wet stain.

Geri cringed; she didn't imagine she'd be any more graceful or dignified in his position.

One of Rich's other men appeared with a drab green can with a silver spout. A familiar scent reached Geri's nose, and she covered her mouth as horror settled into her bones.

Gasoline.

Dan had apparently caught on, too, because he screamed and shook his head, holding up his hands. "No! Please! Please, don't—not that!"

"I don't think that's your call, Mr. Woolman." Rich gestured at the gas can, and his goon began pouring it over a shouting, sobbing, squirming Dan. Then the man stood aside, and Rich approached Dan. He took out a stainless steel Zippo lighter, which flashed in the sun as he flicked it open and closed.

"Please, no," Dan whimpered.

"You've spent your whole life living at the top of the world because of petroleum." Rich turned to the others. "Do you all know how much this man has invested in keeping climate change research from getting to the public eye? To make sure

everyday people didn't know that fossil fuel emissions were the cause until it was too late?"

"That's a lie!" Dan cried. "There's no proof that—"

"There is, Mr. Woolman, and you kept it in the dark so you could keep making billions ." Rich flicked the lighter, letting the flame come to life this time, and he came closer. "I guess you could say"—he let the flame hover near Dan's crotch—"you flew too close to the sun."

A split second later, the gasoline fumes ignited. Dan screamed and struggled, but he couldn't move, and there was nothing he could do to stop the flames from spreading down his legs and up his torso.

Rich's men kept the fire going by tossing in dry grass. The acrid stench of burning hair turned Geri's stomach, but it was the smell of cooking meat that nearly had her throwing up in the sand. She silently begged Dan to lose consciousness. He was doomed, so the sooner he stopped being aware of the pain, the better.

She had no idea how long his strangled, agonized screams and weakening sobs and whimpers went on because time went weird and it felt like hours and hours as the flames chewed away his clothes and hair and blistering flesh. Someone near her threw up. Paul, she thought, but she was too dizzy and horrified to be sure.

Finally, the screams faded. Then Dan went silent. He slumped in his bindings. The men let the fire die down until nothing remained but the smoldering wreckage of a human being.

And then, as if this had just been a normal thing to happen on a normal day, Rich dismissed them.

“I’ll see you in the boardroom at 8:00.” He flashed them a smile, then disappeared into the restaurant.

The remaining competitors stared at Dan. Then each other. Then Dan again.

Geri’s throat burned with acid.

Every time she thought this couldn’t possibly get any worse...

She was so very, very wrong.

And then there were four.

The hotel's restaurant was cavernously empty. Quinn, Kyle, Paul, and Geri sat at a single table, alternately exchanging shell-shocked looks and gazing at nothing with unfocused eyes. The absence of the comforting hum of an industrial air conditioner rang in Quinn's ears as the thick air tangled in his throat and cold sweat trickled down his back.

He was probably going insane, because he swore he could hear the fading echoes of all the noise there'd been the night everyone had arrived. When they'd all been rubbing elbows and drinking amidst a noisy crowd of their entourages. It had been almost comical, how packed a restaurant could get with the peripheral people whose livelihoods each depended on one of a dozen billionaires. Now they were all gone, and so were eight of their employers, and the quietude they'd left behind made Quinn's skin crawl.

Sipping his warm bourbon, Quinn wondered what those employees would all do now. It occurred to him that they could all be dead. They'd been herded onto a boat and whisked away under the pretense of a day cruise, and they'd allegedly been told their employers were staying behind to participate in a reality show. Had they been taken someplace safe, though? Were they still blissfully unaware that their employers were dead? Were their paychecks still coming?

Somehow, Quinn struggled to believe they'd all been killed or otherwise dispensed. For a moment, he thought that might've been because he was too numb and traumatized to work up any anxiety. As his thoughts cleared, though, he realized that for as scary as Rich Price was, he seemed to have a rigid moral compass. He saw

himself as fighting for the working class and exterminating the oppressors. It would be severely off-brand for him to dump several dozen innocent people into the sea.

Or maybe Quinn was just too fucked up by recent events to imagine more horrors happening outside his field of vision.

The silence in the restaurant was so pronounced that everyone jumped when Paul pushed his chair back. “I need some air,” he rasped, and he shuffled toward the patio without further comment.

Yeah, that was relatable. The heat inside this building was stickier and stuffier than it was outside, and at least the breeze coming in off the water made it more bearable out there.

Maybe Paul wouldn’t mind some company.

Quinn tapped a knuckle on the table as he pushed his chair back. “I’m going to get some air myself.” He gestured with his vape pen.

For a heartbeat, he thought they might come along, too. Geri smoked, and Kyle had taken it up in recent days.

They stayed seated, though, expressions blank and eyes distant.

He found the patio deserted, which was odd. Hadn’t Paul just come out here? There weren’t any sentries anymore, either. Quinn cynically wondered if they’d all figured out that the remaining competitors’ spirits were too broken to attempt another escape. All four of them were beaten down, sunburned, sleep-deprived, and traumatized. They’d probably be starving, too, but Rich made sure they’d all eaten enough to keep slogging through this hellish “competition.”

Or maybe this was some kind of game. A dare—the hounds itching for a fox to give them something to chase.

Either way, Paul wasn't in sight, and that worried Quinn. Maybe he'd gone down to the beach. Or maybe he'd—

A distant shout of “Fuck!” echoed off the hotel's exterior.

Quinn straightened. That was Paul's voice.

“Shit,” he muttered, and he jogged off the patio in the direction he thought the voice had come from. No one called after him or warned him to come back, so he just kept going.

Another shout—this one wordless and full of anguish—filled the air. Again, the acoustics fooled Quinn into thinking it had come from the beach. Just as he was starting down that path, though, a choked sob sent him back the other direction—up the walkway that led to the top of the cliffs.

Oh. Shit .

He broke into a run, begging his sore, exhausted legs to get him to the top before it was too late. Before Paul did something he couldn't undo.

To his relief, Paul hadn't tumbled off the cliff. Instead, he was pacing back and forth along the edge, muttering to himself in between crying out and, well, crying.

“Paul?” Quinn approached cautiously. “Hey, man. You okay?”

Paul jumped and spun around, hands up defensively. When he saw Quinn, he lowered his hands and relaxed his posture, but he didn't stop crying.

Quinn inched closer. “Hey. You good?”

“No. No, I’m...” Paul raked both hands through his hair as he continued pacing. “I’m so fucked up. Everything is fucked up and it’s my fucking fault.” His face was blotchy and streaked with tears. It made Quinn weirdly wish for the obnoxious version of Paul O’Connor that had annoyed him in the beginning. That utterly spoiled newly rich asshole who couldn’t stop talking about his cars and his houses and every other goddamned thing would’ve been a sight for sore eyes.

The man in his place—God, he was just... broken.

“What do you mean?” Quinn asked. “You didn’t bring us here. You’re not the reason we’re—”

“My tech!” Paul said. “My goddamned tech! They wouldn’t have been able to do this to us—to all of us—without my fucking tech.”

Quinn stared at him, not sure what to say. It... Well, it was true, to an extent. The absurdly advanced AI tech coming from OysterAI had been a very powerful tool in Rich’s hands. But Quinn didn’t think this was what Paul had intended with his work.

“This isn’t your fault,” he said. “You didn’t know it would—”

“We knew. We all knew.” Paul swiped at his eyes with a shaking hand. “We had these ethicists coming at us from the beginning. They were just fucking relentless, telling us all the ways our tech was going to ruin the world.” His laugh was high-pitched and completely devoid of humor. “They were insufferable.” Face crumpling, he whispered, “They were fucking right, man. They were right! If we hadn’t made our tech, then all this”—he flailed a hand at the hotel—“never would’ve happened!”

“That’s not true.” Quinn tried to sound as calm as possible. “Price still would’ve

found a way to—”

“But we made his job a million times easier!” Paul was sobbing now. “We gave him everything he needed to rope us into this reality show bullshit, and—I mean, look at those fakes he made of us!” He shoved both of his hands into his hair as tears ran down his red face. “He’s got videos that could ruin every single one of our lives beyond repair, and he used my tech to do it. ”

Quinn suppressed a shudder. The deep fake he’d watched of himself would haunt his dreams if he ever slept again. Even knowing it was fake, watching it still traumatized the shit out of him, and he was physically ill at the thought of that footage ever leaking to anyone.

But focusing on that wouldn’t help him bring Paul out of this hysteria, so he schooled his expression and voice. “Any tech can be abused, Paul. I invested in an app that transfers money person-to-person.” He waved a hand. “None of us could have predicted it would be used by cartels and human traffickers.”

“It’s not the same.”

“No, it isn’t, but—”

“I can’t go back,” Paul sobbed. “I can’t. All that money—all those things I bought with it—it’s all bloody now. How fucking many lives have I fucking ruined?”

“Paul, take a breath. You didn’t ruin anyone’s lives. The tech you created is incredibly powerful, but you couldn’t have known it would—”

“The ethicists told us.” Paul’s shoulders sagged and he made a miserable sound. “They fucking told us, over and over and over, all the ways our tech could destroy people. I didn’t believe them because I was fucking stupid, and I just wanted to make

something cool and get fucking rich, and—”

“Paul.” Quinn took a cautious step closer. “Listen to me. You know now. You can modify the tech. Make it harder for people to use it for—”

“No.” Paul’s whisper nearly disappeared into the wind. “It’s too late for that. The genie’s out of the bottle. There’s no going back.” He let his gaze drift toward the cliff’s edge again, and panic surged through Quinn.

“You can use your platform, though,” he pleaded, taking another careful step. “You can become an advocate for ethical use.”

“No.” Paul shook his head, still peering over the edge. “I can’t.”

“You can!” Quinn wanted to lunge forward and grab Paul’s arm, but he was afraid a sudden move would spook him and make him jump or fall. Easing closer, he spoke as soothingly as he could. “You can make a positive difference.”

“I can’t.” To Quinn’s horror, Paul stepped even closer to the cliff’s edge.

“Paul.” Quinn held out his hand. “Come on. Come back over here.”

Paul shook his head. “No. I can’t.” Fresh tears escaped his eyes as his features crumpled. “I made something evil, Quinn.” He turned to him, looking more broken than Quinn had ever seen anyone. “It’s evil. It... God, did you see those things Rich’s people made with it? Those videos? It’s... It’s fucking evil .”

“That doesn’t mean you are.” Quinn beckoned to him. “Come on. Step back away from the—”

“I can’t.” Paul rubbed the back of his neck. “What’s the point, anyway? We’re all

dying here, Quinn. All of us. And we're all going to die horribly."

Quinn pressed his lips together. Admittedly, he was hard-pressed to argue. He lowered his hand, and he couldn't help taking a second to debate joining Paul.

But he just wasn't ready to give up. He wasn't.

"We can find a way out," he whispered, though he wasn't so sure he believed himself. "We can—"

"It doesn't matter." Paul stepped away, the toe of his shoe sticking out over the cliff's edge. "If by some miracle, we get out alive, I have to go back to..." He squeezed his eyes shut and closed his eyes. "I can't go back to that."

"Paul, listen. There's still—"

"I can't." The two words were sharp.

And the step was decisive.

"Paul, no!" Quinn scrambled to the edge just in time to see Paul hit the rocks below. The wind and the crashing waves weren't enough to swallow the crunch of bones. The height of the cliff wasn't enough to keep Quinn from seeing the twitching and writhing that he hoped—fucking hoped so hard—were just the final spasms of an already lifeless corpse.

Quinn dug his fingers into the earth and squeezed his eyes shut. He'd witnessed so damn much suffering and death since he'd come to this island, but Paul's shook him to the core. Seeing someone so broken—so absolutely destroyed—that death was the only mercy... He didn't know how to process that.

Nor did he know how to process the hopelessness whispering in his ear that he should follow Paul onto the rocks. A few seconds of terror. A sudden stop at the end. And then nothing.

It wouldn't be a pleasant end, but it would be a quick one. Far quicker than anything Rich Price would inflict on him. Why wait around to be tortured when he could just—

“Hey. Hey!” A voice shouted behind him. “Get away from there!”

Quinn scrambled to his feet, but before he could even decide if he really was going to Peter Pan to a merciful end, someone grabbed his arm and his collar. He was hauled away from the edge and slammed onto the ground.

His bruised, sunburned skin was on fire. His exhausted body hurt all over. He couldn't fight off the men, and they easily overpowered him.

What was the point in fighting?

So he didn't. He let them yank him to his feet and start frog-marching him down the hill. Somehow his feet stayed under him. Not that it even mattered. So what if the men beat the shit out of him? He might get lucky and they'd kill him like Dan Woolman had killed Charlie Simmons

I should've fucking jumped when I had the chance .

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

“Did you hear that?” Kyle peered at the open door to the patio.

Geri looked up from the empty glass she’d been staring into for... she didn’t know how long. “Hear what?”

He furrowed his brow. “I thought I heard shouting.”

She craned her neck to listen. A moment later, there was indeed shouting, but it was brief and distant. She couldn’t make out what was being said.

Grimacing, she prayed that Quinn hadn’t been caught trying to escape again. Rich had already warned him once, and then made an example out of him. She doubted a third offense would warrant much in the way of mercy.

There was some more noise outside. Voices, she thought. Footsteps. A moment later, some of Rich’s thugs marched onto the patio, half-leading and half-dragging Quinn. Tyson barked orders at some of his men, and one of them closed and locked the patio door, cutting off the only breeze in the room.

They shoved Quinn into a chair at the table with Kyle and Geri. He didn’t fight them. His eyes were unfocused, though he didn’t seem injured besides a small scrape on his forehead. There was some dirt on his clothes, but he wasn’t bleeding and he hadn’t been limping any more than usual.

Tyson pointed at the table and said to one of the goons, “Nobody leaves.”

The response to that was a nod.

He glared at the occupants of the table as if he expected them to protest. None of them made a sound.

Apparently satisfied he'd made his point, Tyson strode out of the restaurant and into the hotel's deserted lobby.

Some of the goons stayed. One hovered by the closed patio door with a rifle. Two others leaned against a wall and had a hushed conversation. No one bothered the three competitors at the small table.

Probably because they knew as well as Geri did that they weren't going anywhere.

As the silence settled in around them, Geri looked around. "Where's Paul?"

The question seemed to bring Quinn into the present. His eyes focused, then focused on her. He sounded dazed as he murmured, "He's dead."

Geri's stomach somersaulted. Beside her, Kyle swore. It shouldn't have even been a surprise anymore. But one more member of their dwindling group was gone now, and Quinn had evidently witnessed it.

She didn't want to ask because Quinn was clearly not handling it well.

Kyle, however, didn't hold back. "What the fuck happened?"

Quinn took his vape pen out of his pocket and turned it between his shaking fingers. Staring out at the patio, he said, "He just... He broke down. About everything his tech is being used for. It..." Quinn closed his eyes and exhaled, shaking his head slowly. When he opened his eyes, he looked right at Kyle with a haunted expression. "It destroyed him. He went up the cliff and..." Quinn made a gesture like something falling.

“Oh my God,” Geri whispered.

“Jesus Christ,” Kyle breathed.

Quinn just nodded, gaze turning distant again. Speaking more to himself than them, he said, “At least it was quick.”

There was cold comfort there. Death at Faraway Resort was nearly always long and agonizing. Elena had probably gone out most peacefully. As high as those cliffs were, it was a safe bet that Paul hadn’t suffered.

Except... he had. With each passing day, there’d been less life in his eyes. Paul had probably been thinking about ending it before he’d even gone up to the cliff.

His death had likely been instantaneous and without physical pain.

But Paul had absolutely suffered.

So had Elena. They all had. They all would. Right up to whatever end Rich had planned for them.

Kyle’s chair scraped on the floor. He shuffled over to the bar, pulled another bottle off the shelf, and came back to the table. Without asking if either of them wanted any, he poured a generous dose of whiskey into each of their empty glasses.

After he’d put the bottle down, he picked up his glass and raised it above the center of the table. “To Paul.”

Geri and Quinn both hesitated, but then they joined him, clinking their glasses with his before they all took long, somber swallows.

In silence, watched over by Rich Price's goons, they drank. When they'd finished, Kyle topped them off again.

As she sipped, Geri looked at Quinn. At Kyle. At the closed door leading to the patio.

And then there were three.

Another miserably hot sleepless night later, they were again summoned to the boardroom.

The restaurant downstairs had seemed eerily huge and empty with just the three of them and the handful of thugs. The boardroom was much smaller, but somehow it was even creepier to sit at this long table with nine empty chairs. Maybe because blood remained in every place someone had been murdered, from the blackened stains at Eric's seat to the relatively fresher place on the floor where Charlie'd rattled his final breath. At least she couldn't smell the cooked flesh and burnt hair from Dan's immolation. Small comforts, she supposed.

Without preamble or explanation, Kevin placed a large manila envelope in front of each competitor. Geri eyed hers warily; all three were thick, nearly bursting with their contents.

"Thank you, Kevin." Rich flashed him a smile. "That will be all."

Kevin nodded. He and the other two men left, and the boardroom was even emptier. Only Rich, Geri, Quinn, and Kyle remained.

"There is one final stage of the game before our time together is complete," Rich announced. "Open your envelopes, please."

Geri exchanged glances with Kyle and Quinn. Then she slid her thumb under the

envelope's flap and opened it.

Oh. Fuck. She'd thought the projections on her walls and ceiling had been bad. These were horrifying, and each photo was worse than the last. People—civilians, by the looks of it—beside the rubble of their homes and the mangled bodies of their loved ones.

There was also a document detailing a specific weapons system developed by Cole Industries. It highlighted multiple places where the V.P. of research and development—Geri—had signed off on design modifications that increased the weapon's damaging capabilities. Three separate transcripts of conversations quoted her saying that the weapon wasn't effective against armored vehicles or bunkers, but would obliterate civilian structures as if they were made of paper.

There was even a quote from her saying that mowing down civilians would turn the populace on their leaders, and that would in turn pressure the leaders into surrendering.

She'd never said any such thing. She also hadn't signed off on those design modifications. She hadn't done half of what was in here.

Still, there was page after page was damning evidence of everything from the usual white collar crimes like fraud and tax evasion to much more serious crimes. There was even evidence of massive amounts of embezzlement, complete with statements from offshore accounts and a sworn testimony from a money launderer.

Most of it was false. Geri knew that. She'd never embezzled, never mind employed a money launderer or stashed ill-gotten cash in offshore accounts. She had never made treasonous deals to sell weapons to enemies of the United States—these contracts were obviously fraudulent.

But she was also too aware of how little it mattered what was real or what was fake. Especially when it was so easy to create extraordinarily convincing fakes. If this information was released, shareholders would dump their stocks. Cole Industries would have their DoD contracts suspended pending investigations. Geri would be ousted from her position as CEO before she could blink.

Given everything she'd learned about her own company since coming to Faraway Resort, maybe none of that was such a bad thing. She wasn't so sure she could resume her role as CEO. Facing the board or the shareholders—the thought turned her stomach.

Some of the fabricated information would land her in prison. Likely for a long time. Assuming the treason didn't land her in front of a literal firing squad.

She turned to Quinn and Kyle. They were both staring at the contents of their own envelopes, faces white and eyes full of terror.

“What the hell is all this?” Kyle demanded as he thumbed through the pages.

Geri looked up at Rich, who watched the three of them with an unreadable expression.

“This is all fake,” Quinn said, his voice hollow.

“Is it, though?” Rich shrugged. “Because regardless of what you think about it, once the information in those envelopes is released to the public and turned over to law enforcement, you and your companies will be fined and sued into the ground. Dozens of people, yourselves included, will likely end up in prison. And no amount of political lobbying or palm-greasing will save any of you from these consequences.”

“But...” Kyle sputtered. “They’re not real! They’re fake!”

Rich chuckled. “Prove it. Because even if you can find a way to prove that any of this”—he gestured at the envelopes—“is fake, you’ll never convince the court of public opinion.”

Geri clenched her jaw. Quinn and Kyle both looked like they desperately wanted to argue but had nothing.

Rich must have taken their silence for having no more questions. “With that out of the way, let me explain how the final stage will work.”

Geri pressed back in her chair as cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck. She was pretty sure that wasn’t from the hotel’s unbearable heat.

“Tomorrow morning,” Rich began, “three boats will leave this island. One of you will be aboard each.”

The thought of leaving the island should’ve had Geri giddy with relief. She’d seen too many of Rich’s games, however, to believe this was anything more than the beginning of something unspeakably horrible.

“Halfway to land,” the man went on, “one of you will die.”

He said it so casually. So matter-of-factly.

And he wasn’t done. “The two survivors will continue to shore. There, one of you will return to your life.” He gestured like something flying away. “You’ve won the game. *Via con dios.*”

Acid climbed the back of Geri’s throat. She was afraid to ask what would happen to the second survivor.

Of course, Rich didn't keep them in suspense.

"The other survivor will have a more challenging time, I'm afraid." He grinned. "By the time you reach the shore, law enforcement will already have their hands on every piece of evidence we have on you. The video you watched during the deep fake challenge—good luck debunking it."

Geri's heart hit the floor. If that video got out—holy fuck. No one would listen to a word she said about mass murder and torture because they'd be too busy hemming her up for treason.

"What's to stop the winner from telling the world about this?" Kyle gestured around the boardroom. "You really think they'll just go back to normal?"

Rich smiled that evil smile Geri had come to associate with screams and the smell of blood. "Oh, they can try." His eyes flicked toward Geri. "Much like Démas Lavigne did."

Ice slithered through Geri's veins. "He... You killed him too?"

"No. But he came to Faraway Resort. He won the game and went back to the life he'd been living before." Rich pursed his lips. "His story was such a sad one, wasn't it?"

Quinn cleared his throat. "Uh, who was this?"

"One of my father's colleagues," Geri said numbly. "He was the only one who didn't get onboard the yacht off St. Martin's with..." She paused as the ice turned even colder. "Eleven other people."

Rich's smile was frostier than her blood. "Such a tragedy. He missed the boat, and the eleven people who didn't... Well, no one could have predicted that storm, could

they?”

Geri sensed Kyle and Quinn eyeing both of them, but her gaze was locked on Rich. “He was a mess when he came back. Wouldn’t talk about anything.” She swallowed hard. “He shot himself. He...” She wiped a hand over her face and stared at the fucking lunatic in front of her. “Are you saying there was no boat? No storm?” She gestured around them. “He went through... this? ”

“He won the game,” Rich said coldly. “And he certainly threatened to tell the world what happened, but he was persuaded not to.” He gestured at the envelopes and their contents. “It wasn’t in his best interest to speak up.”

“It wasn’t in his best interest to off himself either,” she growled.

“Well, given the nature of his sins and the investigations coming his way...” Rich half-shrugged. “Perhaps it was. And you’re all welcome to try to send law enforcement after me and my organization, but every trail will lead not to me, but to you. The sole survivor of such a game, blaming the mass murder of competitors on a non-existent man running a non-existent company? That’ll just turn law enforcement on you, and they won’t have to dig far to find all kinds of evidence that the surviving player, not RightPriceTek, was the mastermind and murderer.”

Kyle, Geri, and Quinn exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“It’s quite simple, my friends,” Rich continued. “I’m a ghost. As is my company. And we didn’t approach anyone for this game until we’d already secured the ability to pin anything we wanted to on any one of you.” He gave a quiet, evil laugh. “You’ve been fucked from the start, and there’s no way out.”

“And then what?” Quinn swallowed. “The winner just... goes back to their normal life? And nobody notices that ten extremely high-profile people died over the course

of—what, a few weeks?”

Rich’s smile turned even colder. “Oh, no one will know that ten of you died during that period. You see, billionaires like yourselves are known for being busy. Jet-setting. Some of you are reclusive, handling most of your business via phone or video conference. While you’ve been here, you’ve all been very busy and productive—you just don’t know it.” He half-shrugged. “For those of us who’ve spent years learning everything we can about your habits and behaviors, it’s much easier than you think to keep you”—he made air quotes—‘alive’ in the public eye. We run your company. Attend your meetings virtually. Conduct interviews remotely. And then...” He put on a mockingly sad face. “Some unexpected tragedy befalls you.”

“That’s insane,” Kyle whispered.

“Is it, though?” Rich’s lips peeled back into an evil grin. “Billionaires love their lavish and extreme lifestyles, which come with high risks, don’t they? After all, did anyone raise an eyebrow when Hans Decker died on K2?”

Geri’s heart stopped. “What? Are you... Are you saying he didn’t?”

“My dear.” Rich laughed condescendingly. “Hans Decker was shark shit six months before the K2 incident.”

She could feel the blood running from her face. “You... I... I spoke to him. Just a month before that expedition. How did—”

“You spoke to one of my people,” Rich said. “And you had no idea until just this moment, did you?”

Geri couldn’t speak. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her suddenly bone-dry mouth.

“That’s the thing with billionaires,” Rich went on. “You’re all convinced you’re critically important and too high-profile to kill. But with a little generative AI, some corporate espionage, and a few strategically placed players...” He gave another dismissive half shrug. “You’d be amazed at how easy it is to replace you with an electronic puppet.”

Everyone was silent for a long, painful moment.

Quinn was the first to break. “How many people have you killed?”

Rich narrowed his eyes and smirked. “So now you want to know my body count?”

Quinn seemed to consider it, then nodded. “Now that you mention it... yeah.”

“Well.” The smirk became a grin. “Except when it’s necessary to make my point, I don’t kill and tell.” Before anyone could press for more information, he said, “Going back to the end of the game, one of you will die at the halfway point. The other two will continue to shore. One will go back to their normal life. The last?” He again gestured at the envelopes. “Will find the media and law enforcement waiting because they’ve also received copies of that.”

One of the guys made a sound like he was about to throw up. Geri pressed back in her seat and tried to catch her breath. “What really happened to our staff?”

Rich smoothed the air with both hands. “All of your entourages have returned to their homes while the ‘show’ is ‘filmed.’ I assure you, everyone is safe, and as far as they know, all of their employers are still alive.” He chuckled. “Though some of them have already heard the sad news that that isn’t the case. Others will find out soon enough.”

“My security will know something is up,” Kyle gritted out. “I guarantee they’re

already suspicious that I ‘agreed’ to this nonsense.”

Rich laughed. “Oh, my sweet summer child. Have you not been paying attention?” He clicked the controller a couple of times, and a video popped up on the big screen. It showed a virtual meeting that was very clearly between Kyle and one other man.

“I’m happy to pay to the end of the contract,” Kyle drawled. “I don’t want to cut into anybody’s paycheck, of course. But I need a break after this reality show nonsense, and I’ll be laying low on this vacation. Need to keep a low-profile, you know? And having security trailing around with me...” He grimaced and shook his head.

The other man—a Black man in a suit—scowled. “I would strongly advise against that, Mr. Aimes. My people are very well-trained in remaining inconspicuous. There’s no reason why anyone else would have any clue that you have security nearby.”

Kyle was already shaking his head. “I’ve been surrounded by people and cameras for weeks .” He made a face. “I need some privacy .”

“I understand that,” the other man argued. “A discreet security presence is still certainly advisable, though. Especially in light of threats you’ve received.”

Kyle waved a hand. “Nah. I’ll be fine. They won’t even know where I am. Nobody will except the ticketing agent and the bellhops.” He laughed at his own joke.

The other guy did not. Instead, he sighed, but he forced a professional smile. “Well, when you’re ready, you let me know, and I’ll have personnel ready to deploy.”

“Thank you, Jim. We’ll be in touch.”

Then the call ended.

Here in the boardroom, Kyle stared at the screen, his face slack.

“Anything you can think of, I’m already ten steps ahead of you.” Rich leaned over his hands on the table and peered at each of them in turn. “You’ve already seen how meticulous and methodical I am. Rest assured, I’ve already thought of everything. Otherwise...” He smiled coldly. “I wouldn’t be letting two of you go.”

They looked at each other, and Kyle and Quinn’s expressions echoed Geri’s horror and disbelief.

“Whatever you’re thinking,” Rich taunted, “You can try. You can tell anyone who will listen about this horrific thing you’ve allegedly endured. But it’s nothing I can’t counter. Nothing I haven’t countered before.” He tapped his chest. “I hold all the cards. If I didn’t, I’d kill all three of you rather than risk turning you loose.”

Geri’s throat was so tight, he may as well have been squeezing her neck.

“There’s only one real winner of this game,” Rich said. “And that winner is me.”

Holy shit. This man was insane. Or the literal devil. Or... something.

Rich knocked his knuckle against the table, then straightened. “I’ll see you all at the marina at 8:00 tomorrow morning.” His grin had never made Geri’s blood colder than it did in that moment. “And we’ll find out who’s going home.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

AI Tech Billionaire Killed in Crash, Injures Others

Generative AI tech superstar and OysterAI founder Paul O'Connor died in a fiery multi-car crash late Saturday night on the I-5 in Los Angeles. Several calls to police reported his Bugatti aggressively and erratically weaving in and out of traffic at extremely high speeds for several miles before he collided with a barrier and lost control.

Four other vehicles were involved in the accident, with three occupants being rushed to nearby hospitals with life-threatening injuries and four treated for minor injuries. O'Connor was deceased on-scene, and his body was said to be "burned beyond recognition." The Los Angeles County Medical Examiner's office indicated that the body was damaged too much to determine if he was under the influence of any substances, but police found cocaine and paraphernalia in the remains of the vehicle.

As of Sunday morning, the hospitalized victims are said to be in stable condition.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Kyle, Quinn, and Geri sat out on the patio as the sun baked the little island. There wasn't even much of a breeze right now, so the heat and humidity just sat there, weighing down on sore exhausted shoulders.

It felt so foolish and pointless, just waiting for Rich to kill one of them, destroy another, and send the third back to their old life. They should be running. Fighting. Doing... something . Anything besides sitting here like livestock who knew they were headed to the slaughterhouse tomorrow morning.

But much like that livestock, they were penned in. Watched over. There was nowhere to go and no way to fight back.

There was nothing to do except wait to die.

No. No, Quinn refused to accept that. Not until his blood was actively spilling. He was beyond despair now, but maybe if they worked together—maybe if they put their heads together and at least made some kind of last stand, they could, if nothing else, go down swinging.

“We have to do something,” he whispered. “We have to get out...” He trailed off, not even sure he had the energy to finish the thought, never mind follow through with it.

“What do you have in mind?” Geri asked.

Shaking his head, Quinn turned his vape pen over and over between his fingers. Keeping his voice as quiet as possible so Tyson and Kevin didn't hear him, he murmured, “I don't know. I just know that if we're going to get out of here, this is

our last chance.”

Geri nodded, gazing at the cigarette smoldering between her fingers. She seemed to rally a little, and she quietly said, “We know the terrain better than we did the first time. The odds still aren’t great, but I like them more than I like staying here and waiting to die.”

That injected a little life into Quinn. She was right. It wasn’t great, but they weren’t flying as blind as they’d been the first time. “Agreed. Rich’s guys have blocked off the path up to the cliffs and the one we took the first time, but there’s—”

“There’s no fucking point,” Kyle hissed. “Can’t you see that?”

Geri and Quinn both watched him.

He huffed sharply and shook his head as he waved at them and their surroundings. “Look at this. Look at us. They’ve told us the endgame, but they’re not keeping us apart. They’re not keeping us locked up.” He grimaced and slouched back in his chair. “They want us to try to escape. It’s part of the game.”

“Of course it is,” Geri said. “But what choice do we have? Just lay down and wait for them to finish us off?” She looked at Quinn, then back at Kyle. “I don’t know what our odds are of getting away, but I’ll take my chances if it means I don’t wind up dead tomorrow or in prison when I touch dry land.”

Kyle’s jaw worked and he avoided her gaze.

Quinn wasn’t any happier with her proposal, but he didn’t have any better ideas.

Geri took a deep breath, glancing at the men who were keeping watch out on the patio. Dropping her voice even more, she whispered, “I can find the booster. It’s out

on the beach—I know where I dropped it. Quinn, is your phone charged?”

He nodded. “I can get it from my room.”

“Okay. We already know if we get far enough out, there’s a signal. It’s not a lot, but it’s there. This time, we’re just going to have to take the risk and keep the signal on until we connect with someone.”

Kyle furrowed his brow. “You... managed to call out?”

“I’ve got a booster my company developed for the military, and it’s strong enough to ping a satellite once we’re far enough from the hotel.” She paused. “I managed to get some text messages out, but they bounced. I think this time, I need to call out so I can be sure something connected. And I need to keep the phone on until I get an affirmative response.”

Kyle pushed out a breath. “That... Okay. That, um... That might work.” At least he was onboard now.

“It’s all we’ve got,” Quinn said. To Geri, he said, “And you’re sure you can find the booster?”

“Yes. The place they picked us up—there were some boulders nearby that I’ll recognize. If I can find that spot, I can find the booster.”

“Okay. Okay, good.” Quinn ran through a few potential escape routes in his mind, but there was a problem. The sentries already knew escape attempts were a possibility, and they clearly knew the terrain better than the escapees. Especially with only three people left to keep an eye on and several access points now blocked off, it wouldn’t take much for them to intercept the small group when they tried to run.

Unless, of course, they had other things to keep them occupied.

He leaned forward, resting his folded arms on the edge of the table. “Look, of the three of us, I guarantee they’re watching me the closest. I’ve already made two attempts, so...” He waved a hand.

“If you’re about to suggest leaving yourself behind,” Geri said, her voice hard, “stop right there. We’re all getting out of—”

“If we’re going to play the odds,” he said, “then we should at least try to stack those odds in our favor.”

She blinked.

“If I do something to get their attention,” he went on, “they’re going to focus on me.” He paused. “Especially if I do more than just try to run out another exit.”

Kyle cocked his head.

Geri raised an eyebrow. “What do you have in mind?”

“Fire, mostly.” He beckoned to Geri. “Leave me your lighter. I’m pretty sure I can create a solid diversion here that’ll keep Rich and his minions busy.”

Geri regarded him uncertainly. Then she dug in her pocket and pulled out her lighter. As she pressed it into his palm, she said, “Be careful. Please? We’ll find a way to come back for you.”

He nodded. “I’m holding you to that.”

“Okay, so you’re going to create a diversion,” Kyle said. “Geri, what are we doing?”

Geri quirked her lips. Then she leaned in. “Okay, first I think we should wait until after dark. It’ll be more dangerous to move around, but we’ll be harder to see, too.”

“Good idea,” Kyle said.

“Right. So once the sun goes down...”

As he ate and smoked with Geri and Kyle, Quinn tried and failed to make sense of how he’d ended up here. He came up empty.

He did find one tiny flicker of comfort in this whole shitshow.

Sitting out here with his last two “competitors,” his head throbbing from the projectors and speakers that had kept him awake every night, he realized this was his last night here. As he sipped a disgustingly warm glass of whiskey, he clung to that truth—that no matter what happened, he would never spend another night in this place.

Tomorrow, he’d leave this island forever. Maybe he wouldn’t survive to step onto dry land—odds there were one in three—but he wouldn’t have to spend another night like this.

He’d always loved the thrill of a risky bet, especially when the stakes were high.

One in three odds of losing? Those weren’t bad at all. They didn’t even favor the house.

Except in this case, it was a one in three chance of dying in whatever creative and sadistic way Rich Price dreamed up.

It was also a one in three chance of returning to a world turned upside down by

allegations—some true, some not—that no reputation could ever survive.

The truly winning bet felt like losing, too. Go back to the world he'd left behind? Resume living as Quinn Hayworth, billionaire socialite who had the world at his feet and high-rolling gambler who thought the world was his oyster? He didn't even know who that person was anymore. Too much had happened in front of his eyes. Too much had broken parts of him he hadn't imagined could ever be broken.

The memory of Paul's body hitting the rocks haunted him, and not just because it had been the brutal end of a man overwhelmed by despair.

I should've jumped too.

Over and over, he replayed that memory as that thought echoed in his mind. Nothing that came after today would be better than a sudden crunch on sharp rocks. Even if he hadn't died on impact, even if he'd had to lie there, broken and in agony, it would've ended by now. Whatever future lay ahead of him tomorrow... wouldn't end any time soon.

He closed his eyes and pressed the glass to his forehead. It was cool, but not nearly cold enough. What if he "won" this competition? What if he had to face the life that seemed alien and wrong now? He'd seen too much. Too much death and violence, but also too much of the ugly underbelly of his own world.

He could join Paul. Not off the cliffs, since Rich's people had sealed every hotel exit, but he could end it. A noose made from a belt or a sheet. A broken bottle as a makeshift knife.

But there was that chance—that one in three chance—that he'd be the one to return to his old life. And if that happened, he could change something. He could do exactly what he'd pleaded with Paul to do—be the voice of reason and use his platform and

his reach to change things.

He wasn't sure what that would look like. How he could make enough of a difference to soothe his battered soul. But if he ended things right now, then he could do nothing.

There wasn't a lot of hope right now. It was entirely possible he was foolishly setting himself up to die horribly at the hands of their sadistic "host."

But ever the gambler, he loved a long shot.

And if nothing else, the prospect of helping Geri and Kyle escape kept him from lying down and giving up. Forget the odds of "winning"—they could escape, or they could die trying.

All he knew in that moment was that, one way or another, this was his last night on this godforsaken rock.

The three of them finished their drinks, their food, and their smokes, and they casually left the patio and made their way back up to their rooms. Kyle and Geri confirmed the time and place they were going to meet, and he headed to his suite.

Geri continued with Quinn. When they reached his door, he stepped inside and returned a moment later with his phone. As he handed it to her, he said, "It's fully charged, and the location settings are turned off. Turn them on when you need to transmit your location, but don't leave them on or it'll drain the battery."

She smiled as she slid it into her pocket. "I know. Does it need a passcode?"

"Not anymore."

“Good.” Turning serious, Geri took his hand. “Please be careful.”

“You too.” He chuckled nervously. “Won’t do me any good to make a big fireworks show if the two of you have already been caught.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Yeah, well, there’s no point in coming back for you if you’ve been caught, so…”

“So… we agree—don’t get caught. Deal.”

“Deal.”

They locked eyes for a moment.

Then he cleared his throat. “I’m, uh…” He gestured toward his door. “I’d better start putting some things together.”

“Me too. Good luck out there.”

“Same to you.”

They held each other’s gazes. As he started to go, she said, “Quinn?”

He turned around.

She watched him for a couple of heartbeats, then stepped closer, cupped his face, and pressed her lips to his. When she drew back, he stared at her in surprise, and he almost didn’t catch when she said, “I mean it—be careful.”

He swallowed. “I will. And I mean it too— you be careful out there.”

“I will.” She pushed herself up and kissed him again, letting it linger for a moment.

They shared one last look before they headed in opposite directions.

Quinn’s heart pounded as he walked. He was determined to survive this. He was determined to help Geri and Kyle survive it too.

The stakes had never been higher, the odds never farther from his favor.

But he was going to fucking win this hand.

Darkness was settling in around the hotel when Quinn returned to the deserted restaurant downstairs. Heart thumping, he went to the bar to pour himself a drink while Tyson watched with a bored expression from the exit leading to the patio.

Quinn made a show of being indecisive between the various bottles of liquor. Finally, he selected two that were more than half full—some cheap vodka and some not-so-cheap tequila. He pulled them from the shelf, then started back toward the lobby.

“Hey!” Tyson barked, and he jogged across the restaurant. “Where the fuck are you going with those?”

Quinn glanced down at the bottles, then at the armed-to-the-teeth asshole. “To my room? So I can get absolutely fucking shitfaced for my last night on earth?”

Tyson narrowed his eyes. “The liquor stays in the bar.”

“Or what?” Quinn let his shoulders drop. “The licensing board will take away the hotel’s liquor license?” He rolled his eyes. “Come on, dude. There’s a one in three chance I’m a dead man in less than twenty-four hours.” He held up the bottles and looked plaintively at Tyson. “Can’t I just drink in peace?”

The man's expression remained unchanged.

Quinn huffed and shrugged. "I mean, it's your call. I can take them up to my room. Or... you can stand there and listen to me sob like a teenage girl who got dumped on prom night." He jiggled the tequila bottle. "Because that's what this shit does to me."

Just as he'd hoped, Tyson wrinkled his nose in disgust.

To drive it home, Quinn added, "And that's before I start puking like a firehose in every direction until—"

"For fuck's sake. Fine!" Tyson put up his hands. "Go drink in your room, you fucking pussy."

"That's what I thought." Quinn paused. "I mean, you can come join me. We can have a nice manly cry together for—"

"Fuck. Off. "

Quinn chuckled and left the bar, bottles in hand, grateful Tyson couldn't hear his heart slamming into his ribs. He hadn't been sure if that gambit would work. Hopefully his luck would hold.

By the bank of elevators, he unscrewed the cap on the tequila and took a swig. He grimaced and shook his head as he swallowed it; God, he hated tequila, but it tasted better than vodka, so... whatever.

He had no idea if there were security cameras out here, but he worked fast just in case. Eyes still watering, he pulled a torn strip of bedsheet out of his pocket and stuffed it down the neck of the bottle. He sloshed the liquor around a little to make sure the rag was as saturated as possible, then left a piece sticking out of the top as he

put the cap back on to keep the rag from sinking to the bottom. He did the same with the vodka bottle.

He glanced around, and he listened. No one was coming, at least not that he could see or hear.

He took Geri's lighter from his pocket, flicked it, and held the flame to the fuse sticking out of the vodka bottle. It caught, and he let it burn down until it had reached the liquor-soaked parts. Then he stepped out of the bay of elevators and hurled the bottle toward the hotel's front desk.

Glass shattered. Flames spread. Papers and fake plants ignited.

And Quinn ran .

Chaos was erupting behind him, but he didn't dare look back. He shouldered open a door and ran down a short hallway into the kitchen. Here, he dumped cooking oil on the floor, making sure it spread. Then he tested an emergency exit, making sure it wasn't locked. It opened, so he lit the second Molotov cocktail, threw it toward the puddle of cooking oil, and sprinted out the back.

There was a smaller patio out here that was probably meant for the cooks to use for smoking, as well as to take trash out. He hurried down a small flight of stairs and found himself by the loading dock and a large staging area, which were—

Not deserted.

Several men were working out here. Some patrolled with guns. Others were loading a flatbed truck. Near the building, there were two drab green Humvees, and if he wasn't mistaken, those were some very large guns mounted on top.

And on the loading dock itself, were those—

Holy shit. Geri had said she'd seen someone moving body bags the night they'd arrived. If the bagged shapes lying on the pavement beside the truck weren't bodies, Quinn had no idea what they were.

He also didn't have time to stop and worry about it. Chaos was beginning to break out inside the hotel, with alarms going off and shouts emerging from the patio area.

No one had seen Quinn yet, so he ducked into the shadows and hurried along the edge of the loading dock.

Then he heard it—a diesel engine.

He looked around and found the source. One of the flatbed trucks was idling.

The driver? Nowhere in sight.

Well, hell. Sometimes when you played a risky hand with long odds, you hit a jackpot.

He glanced around, then sprinted to the truck, hauled open the door, and climbed up into the cab. He threw the vehicle into gear and gunned it, and tore out of the staging area. Men shouted and tried to get in his way, and he thought a couple of bullets pinged off the truck, but they didn't stop him. He peeled through the exit and followed the narrow road, bumping and fishtailing on the uneven ground.

Up ahead—oh, hell. Another jackpot.

The airstrip.

He floored the gas and tore across a narrow green belt, bounced off a curb, and nearly lost control of the truck. When he'd straightened out, he raced down the long airstrip as fast as this old-ass truck would go.

Behind him—headlights.

Then another light came on and started to rise.

He wasn't going to be able to outrun a Humvee in this thing, and he sure as shit wouldn't outpace a helicopter. Time to bail.

He moved to the right, getting closer to the tree line. There was still some solid distance between him and his pursuers, but it was narrowing fast. For a hot second, he debated seeing if action movies were accurate and a person really could jump out of a speeding vehicle without dying or getting seriously hurt.

Rational thought caught up, though, as did the realization that the fence along the trees was topped with concertina wire.

He pulled the seat belt down over his shoulder and fumbled with it until it clipped into place. Then he slowed down just enough that the truck wouldn't flip, and then he turned and rammed it straight into the fence.

It bumped and bounced, slamming him around and throwing him against the seat belt. Metal shrieked, though he didn't know if that was the vehicle or the fence.

The truck lurched to a violent stop against a tree. The seat belt drove a cry of pain out of Quinn as it yanked him back, but at least he didn't go flying through the windshield.

He unbuckled it. The door was jammed shut, but the windshield was broken. He

shouldered, then kicked it free, and climbed out and jumped to the ground. His pant leg snagged on some of the concertina wire that the truck had uncoiled; getting free tore up his fingers and nicked his ankle, but he got loose.

Then he ran like hell into the jungle, stumbling blindly in the darkness as he tripped over roots and bushes.

Something tangled around one foot. Then the other. Momentum carried his center of gravity too far forward, and he fell. As soon as he tried to get his feet under him again, though, pain burned around his ankles and calves.

“Fuck,” he whispered, trying to kick free, but both the pain and entanglement got worse.

He tried to roll over, but that didn’t work. He reached down to untangle himself, and—

Cold fear shot through him.

More concertina wire.

Oh, fuck. It had been so hidden by the undergrowth he wouldn’t have even seen it in the daylight.

He frantically brushed at it and pulled at it, gritting his teeth as the razor sharp wire slashed his hands and feet.

Light bobbed nearby.

Fuck. Fuck!

He tried harder to get loose, but only succeeded in getting more tangled.

Footsteps.

Careful, sure footsteps.

Coming closer.

Was it too much to hope that was Geri and Kyle? That they'd somehow found him?

No, they were up the island's coast by now, assuming they hadn't been caught.

This wasn't Geri and Kyle.

Panic had him shaking and almost hyperventilating, and he kept trying like hell to get loose from the wire and the undergrowth.

A stick snapped under some kind of weight. Then a light shone right in Quinn's face. He flinched away, swearing under his breath because he knew what was coming.

Maybe he'd get lucky and they'd just shoot him right here and be done with it.

Somehow, he doubted it.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Quinn's distractions did the trick. The fires in the kitchen and lobby had everyone's focus, and Kyle and Geri slipped out during the chaos.

"Be careful in the jungle," she reminded him under her breath as they ventured into the dense trees. "Quinn and I found concertina wire out here in a few places. Just in the bushes."

"Ugh. Of course you did," Kyle grumbled. "Snakes and gunmen and razor wire, oh my."

Geri stifled a laugh.

They stayed quiet after that, picking their way through the undergrowth. At least they had some moonlight; doing this in pitch black would be nearly impossible. Even the moonlight only helped so much, and they moved toward the edge of the tree line to walk along the beach as much as possible. Visibility still wasn't great, but there was less to trip over.

Kyle halted. "Wait. Do you hear that?"

Geri stopped too, and she held her breath, listening.

Over the gentle slosh of the ocean, she heard it—a helicopter. Distant, but distinct.

"Let's get back into the woods," she whispered. "Just in case."

"Good idea." As they moved from the beach into the jungle, he asked, "Think they're

after us or Quinn?

She gulped. “Hopefully they’re after whatever decoys he put out there.”

“Let’s hope.”

They might have been in luck, too—the helicopter didn’t come any closer, and it eventually faded into the distance, heading back toward the hotel. She and Kyle stopped to listen several times, staying as still and silent as possible and listening for movement in the jungle. It helped that the birds were quiet this time of night; really the only sounds were some nocturnal animals moving around and the tide lapping at the beach.

She knew from experience just how quiet Rich’s men could be, though, so she didn’t take the relative silence for granted.

As they walked, she kept an eye on the beach, and when a familiar section came into view, she motioned for Kyle to follow her back toward the sand.

“Is this where you left the booster?” he asked.

“Yeah. Watch my back.”

While he kept an eye out for pursuers, she retraced her steps on the beach as best she could. There were some large rocks that she’d used as landmarks, but it was impossible to guess exactly where the booster had landed. She’d been struggling with the men when she’d dropped it, and it could’ve tumbled away from—

There.

The black corner stuck out of the sand, and she pulled it free. It was still intact and

undamaged, just as she'd expected. It also still turned on.

"Got it," she said as she rejoined Kyle near the trees. There, she pulled out Quinn's phone and activated it and the booster. Just like before, the signal was strong, and she was able to do a quick search for harbormasters and other emergency numbers in the region.

And then, bingo—the U.S. Coast Guard station in San Juan. The Dutch Coast Guard in St. Martin would be closer, she guessed, but she didn't have time to worry if they spoke English. Hopefully they could all communicate with each other and get them off this stupid rock.

She called, and the female voice on the other end was the most incredible thing she'd ever heard in her life.

"This is the Coast Guard, right?" Geri asked. "The U.S. Coast Guard?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay. I need help, and I need it urgently."

"All right. What is your name, location, and the nature of your emergency?"

"My name is Geraldine Cole," she said. "I'm on—I don't even know the name of the island. There's a place here called Faraway Resort, and I'm being held here against my will. I need help."

"Copy that, Ms. Cole. Can you give me your coordinates?"

"Yeah. Give me a second." Geri lowered the phone and pulled up the location tracker. She read off the latitude and longitude.

“All right. I’ve got that location pinpointed. We’re scanning the area to see if there are other crafts in the region. Can you stay on the line?”

“Yes.” Geri exhaled. “I’ve... I’ve still got some decent battery. Do you have the number in case the call drops?”

The person on the other end read the number back. “If the call drops, stand by and we’ll call you back. If you don’t hear from us within five minutes, call us.”

“Got it.” She raked a trembling hand through her hair.

Kyle watched her uneasily. “Anything?”

“They’re working on it. They’ve got our location—they’re just seeing if anything is in the area.”

He made a disgruntled noise. She understood—this was the first contact they’d had with the outside world, and their first glimmer of hope, but they were being tracked like dogs with very little space to make their escape. Patience was a difficult virtue to have.

“Ms. Cole?” the person on the other end said. “We’re making contact with a craft that’s near your location. Are you safe for the moment?”

“Uh, well... not really. We’ve managed to get away from the resort, but people are looking for us.”

“Is this a human trafficking situation?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Got it. All right, my colleague has confirmed there is a craft heading in your direction. They’re about an hour out, but they’ll make the best time they can.”

Geri closed her eyes and exhaled. “Thank God.”

“The craft is a large yacht called the Miss Prosperity . They’re coming your way at full throttle.”

“Thank you so much. I can’t stay on this line, but I’ll check back in.”

“We’ll be standing by for your call.”

They disconnected, and Geri passed the information along to Kyle.

“Well, hallelujah,” he said on a relieved sigh. “Maybe we’ll get out of this fucking place after all.”

“Let’s hope.” She looked around. “I think we need to stay in the jungle for now. Until we see signs of a boat.”

Kyle shuddered. “Snakes and gunmen and razor wire, oh my.”

The quip was funny—right up until a stick cracked under heavy weight.

Kyle and Geri both scurried into the shadows like startled rats. She wedged herself up beneath a rotting log, and Kyle disappeared from her sight into the dense foliage.

“Fucking hell,” he rasped. “You think they’ve—”

“Stay quiet,” she hissed. “Breathe. Stay down, and don’t. Move. ”

She hoped he'd heard her. Either way, he stilled and didn't make a sound.

Elsewhere in the jungle, there were sounds. It was impossible to count how many men were searching for them. They were mostly quiet, though it was impossible to run completely silent in this kind of environment. Leaves rustled. Branches moved. Twigs broke.

Geri swallowed hard and listened, irrationally sure the men were tracking her by the sound of her thumping heart.

Quiet movement nearby set her senses on even higher alert. Close. Way too close. And too quiet to be a human—even one trained to move stealthily.

Something rustled. This time she caught the motion in her peripheral vision, illuminated faintly by the moonlight peeking through the trees. Moving only her eyes, she followed the sound and the movement.

Oh.

Fuck.

In the beginning, she'd thought the warnings about venomous snakes on the island were just a way of scaring people out of leaving the hotel.

The reptilian eyes fixed on her from maybe a foot away from her arm strongly suggested otherwise.

Lit by the moon, it was unsettlingly easy to see. It was big—at least three or four feet—and she suddenly wished she'd retained all the signs of venomous versus non-venomous snakes. She'd hiked in places with all kinds of snakes, and she'd only made a half-assed attempt to internalize those details because she'd carelessly

thought she'd never have to worry about it.

Was the triangular head shape indicative of a dangerous snake? Or was that a round head? For the life of her, she couldn't remember if the slit-shaped pupils were a bad sign—mostly because she was too unsettled by being close enough to a snake to notice anything about its eyes.

The snake watched her as it slithered under a bush, its body steadily pulling into a coil. Its forked tongue darted out. Again. The creature was aware of her and checking her out, but she didn't know enough about serpentine body language to judge its next move. Or enough about snake behavior to know if this type of snake—whatever type it happened to be—was more likely to strike or bail.

In the jungle around her, sticks cracked. Bushes rustled. The snake drew back, tensing as if the noise made it nervous. Its eyes stayed focused on Geri.

“Oh, fuck,” Kyle murmured from his hiding place. “They’re gonna find us.”

Geri pressed her lips together. She wanted to whisper to him to stay calm. She wanted to reach out and touch him. Reassure him somehow.

But that could give away both of their positions. And provoke the snake.

Another stick broke, the sound coming from unnervingly close by.

Kyle was vibrating now, the leaves and undergrowth around him rustling with his movement.

“Kyle,” she said, cringing when the snake twitched. “Stay down. Don’t move.” She paused. “Breathe , Kyle.”

He made a sound she couldn't quite parse. A mix of acknowledgment and fear, she thought. Definitely some panic.

"Fan out," a voice echoed off the trees, seeming to come from everywhere. "There's only so many places they can go."

Kyle pushed out a shuddering breath.

Another stick cracked.

Then, before Geri could try for more quiet reassurance, Kyle flew out of his hiding spot and ran.

Geri clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. The snake, in that moment, was a blessing in disguise—when it bristled, she stilled, not even daring to breathe for fear of provoking it further.

All around her, the jungle erupted into chaos. The men pursuing them were running now, shouting at Kyle and at each other. Geri wanted to scream at him to run, run, fucking run—he'd already blown his cover, so for the love of God, run—but those eyes fixed on her kept her frozen. Her vision was starting to cloud, so she let herself exhaled painfully slowly before drawing in an even slower breath. Her lungs screamed and her head spun, but that damn snake was still—

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Someone screamed, and after a second, it registered as Kyle's voice. That wasn't just fear—that was pain. Because God knew Geri had become well-acquainted with the difference since she'd come to this fucking island.

He screamed and screamed, and the sound didn't get any weaker. Wherever he was,

wherever he'd been shot, Kyle was in agony.

She squeezed her eyes shut. There was nothing she could do to help him. Just like there'd been nothing she could do for Eric, Lynette, Art, and everyone else who'd been murdered as part of this sadistic game.

Crack!

Kyle's screams went silent.

Geri exhaled and put her forehead down on the damp ground. She was vaguely aware of the snake's agitated movements, but in that moment... who the hell cared?

"The woman can't be too far," someone shouted. "Fan out and look for her."

Her pulse sped up again. If they found her, they might shoot her. But they might also take her back to Rich.

Visions of Quinn, battered and beaten after his second escape attempt, flickered through her mind, and she shuddered. She had to keep eluding these men.

She started to push herself up, but the snake jumped, reminding her it was there. It didn't strike, but it was poised to react somehow. Maybe biting, maybe fleeing; she had no idea.

She drew back as slowly and silently as she could, trying not to make any sudden moves or jostle any plants that might give away her position. She concentrated on staying still. On staying quiet. On staying hidden.

On somehow staying sane—or close to it—while she was pursued by men employed by a murderous psychopath.

And then...

All she heard was her own heartbeat.

As that slowed a little, she could hear the disinterested slosh of the tide.

No voices. No movement. No sticks breaking.

In the little crevice where she was hiding, something rustled. She lifted her head, and the snake was slipping away into the bushes, its coil unraveling into a single scaled ribbon that slipped into the undergrowth.

Geri exhaled. Then, she emerged from her hidey hole. She stayed low and looked around. From here, she had a decent view of the beach, and there wasn't a soul in sight. She couldn't even see Kyle's body, though that could've been lying anywhere.

The men pursuing her were gone.

Or maybe hiding within the trees, waiting for her to move?

Because they couldn't possibly have given up that easily. Could they?

She felt around in the dense foliage until she found a good-sized tree limb. Then she heaved it like a spear into the jungle. It bounced off a tree with an audible crack before landing noisily in the bushes below.

Nothing reacted. Nothing moved.

She waited a moment, then did it again, hurling a branch in another direction.

Nothing reacted. Nothing moved.

With some cautious relief, she crept closer to the edge of the trees, peering around in the darkness for any sign that she wasn't alone.

The whole jungle was quiet. So was the beach.

Heart still racing, she ducked in between a couple of trees and she turned on the phone again. The booster picked up a strong signal, and she called the Coast Guard station again.

"Your ride is about twenty minutes out," the man on the other end assured her. "Where on the island are you?"

She gave him a rough idea of where she was—on the northern coast of the island, maybe three miles west of the hotel.

"They're on their way," he said. "Hang in there."

And right on cue, about twenty minutes later, the moon picked out a shape out on the water, and her heart stopped.

A boat.

A yacht .

Someone on the deck was shining a searchlight toward the shore, and she thought she saw two men on the deck, peering around with binoculars.

Was this the boat that had come to help her? Or one from Rich's fleet?

She cautiously ventured out to get a closer look. With every step, she calculated how close she was to the trees; it would still be a hell of a sprint, but if the boat turned out

to be hostile, she could make a run for it. She might even make it.

They could be friendly, though, and they were her only bet for getting off this island.

One looked right at her, and he waved. She waved back as she inched toward the shore. Was it the right boat?

God, please, let it be the right boat...

And as it came closer, the moonlight off the water lit up the dark letters on the hull—Miss Prosperity .

Geri almost cried with relief. She looked up and down the beach and didn't see any sign of life except the towering hotel in the distance.

That didn't mean hostiles weren't hiding in the jungle, though, so she hurried toward the shore. She wasn't about to put these men in any more danger than she had to.

She splashed into the water, ignoring the sting of salt in her myriad scrapes and cuts. She tripped and stumbled over unseen rocks, but her shoes at least kept her from tearing up her feet. When it became too deep to run well, she swam, muscles screaming with fatigue as she tried to close the distance to the boat as fast as she could.

When she reached it, two of the men waited for her on the stern, and they helped her up and off the ladder.

As soon as she was solidly on the boat, Geri tumbled onto her knees, her legs refusing to hold her up anymore. She couldn't help it—she started sobbing.

Through the bone-deep relief, though, she was aware that she wasn't out of danger.

“We have to go. We have to—” She waved toward the horizon. “Get away from this island. They’ve got guns, helos...” Hugging herself against a deep chill, she gritted out, “I don’t think they’ll hesitate to kill you guys. We have to go!”

One of the men offered her a rough brown blanket. “We’ve got it under control, don’t you worry.”

“Okay. And there’s... There’s another person. Another one who escaped. I don’t know where—”

“They found him too,” the man said.

Her head snapped up. “Quinn? They found Quinn?”

“Don’t know the name, but I heard on the radio—someone else got picked up.”

All the air rushed out of her lungs and her shoulders sagged. “And he’s alive? He’s okay?”

The man nodded. “He’s safe.”

“Oh, thank God...”

A moment later, the engines fired up. The boat eased back into motion.

As the craft picked up speed, Geri stared at the island, watching the lights illuminating the hotel’s familiar shape getting smaller and smaller.

Then she sat back against the bulkhead, and she closed her eyes as she let some more tears fall. “Oh my God.” She shivered violently as if she’d just been pulled from icy waters instead of something warm and tropical. “I am so glad you guys found me.”

“It’s all good.” A crewman crouched beside her and offered a bottle of water. “We’ve got you, all right? Just relax for a bit.”

She nodded, and with some effort, she cracked open the water bottle. She was trembling so bad she almost spilled the water. As the boat bounced over waves, she drank the water and tried to compose herself.

All the while, she kept expecting gunfire. Or a helicopter and then gunfire. A mortar or something. Hell, a fucking drone. God only knew what Rich Price had at his disposal to keep his captives where he wanted them.

The crew of this boat—fuck. What if they were killed trying to rescue her? What if she had just lured them to their doom?

But no one came after them. No helicopters. No boats. No bullets.

They just cruised off into the night, undisturbed and unhindered, leaving that island on the horizon where it belonged.

The men helped her into the boat’s enormous cabin and sat her in a plush chair in the living area. She drank water and kept the blanket tight around her shoulders. The air around her was hot and humid, but she was cold from the inside out. All the fear and adrenaline of her time at Faraway Resort were crashing, and she couldn’t stop shivering.

It was over. Someone had saved her. Someone else had picked up Quinn.

For the first time since her private jet had touched down on that airstrip...

Geri was safe.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Geri must've fallen asleep for a few hours, because when she opened her eyes again, the sun was coming up. She was still on the boat, still wrapped in the coarse blanket, but the warm light of dawn was beginning to come in through the windows and illuminate her surroundings.

One of the men who'd helped her noticed she was awake. "Morning. We'll be ashore in a few hours."

She frowned. "I didn't think we were that far from dry land."

He chuckled. "We weren't. We stopped in Petit Tabac for fuel, but we're heading to St. Lucia. Your friend will meet us there."

Her friend. Quinn.

Geri closed her eyes and exhaled. Quinn was alive. They'd made it out. In a few hours, she'd see him, and they could get the hell back to the U.S. Maybe together, they could tell the world what Rich Price had done to them and the others.

"I'm surprised we didn't wake you up," the man said. "We weren't exactly running silent."

"I slept right through it?"

He grimaced sympathetically as he nodded. "You seemed like you needed it. When we realized you weren't coming around, we figured we ought to let you sleep."

“I appreciate that.” She got up and shook off the blanket. Her bones were stiff and everything ached, but she’d slept. Really slept. She’d been a light sleeper for a long time, but she could probably sleep through anything now, thanks to the noise and projections in her hotel room.

She shuddered. That was over. Thank God, it was fucking over .

Someone brought her some more water and a small plate of fruit and a couple of hard-boiled eggs to eat. She had to force herself to eat and drink slowly; hungry as she was, there was no point in making herself sick.

As she was finishing the bottle of water, the engines abruptly cut off, and the vessel began to lose speed.

Her heart did the opposite—speeding up with both relief and excitement. They’d already reached dry land?

She hurried out of the cabin and onto the deck.

There was no land in sight. Not even the fuzzy hint of it on the horizon in any direction.

There was, however, another boat bobbing on the waves maybe twenty or thirty feet away. Without the wind or the engines, the world was silent apart from the water sloshing against the rocking hulls beneath the word Miss Decadence .

Though she wasn’t sure why, cold fear wrapped tendrils around Geri’s heart. What was happening? Why had they stopped?

Maybe they just needed to swap something with the other boat. She was probably just jumpy and paranoid after everything she’d been through.

But then some people emerged from the cabin of the other yacht, and Geri's stomach dropped when Tyson shoved Quinn up against the railing.

Every feeling of safety and relief evaporated into pure horror as she put her hand to her mouth. Oh no. Oh, shit.

From across the expanse of water, Quinn met her gaze. Her own terror reflected back in his expression; what was going to happen?

A hand appeared on her shoulder, straightening her spine and driving a yelp of fear from her. She spun around and—

Oh no...

Rich Price grinned. "You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"

She stared at him, unable to speak. Unable to breathe.

He laughed and squeezed her shoulder. "I told you from the start, Ms. Cole—I thought of everything."

Right then, the two men who'd helped her onto the boat emerged from the cabin, both carrying buckets. They went to the railing and dumped them over the side, pouring out chunks of meat along with a nauseating amount of blood.

Pieces of someone who'd "lost" the competition, maybe?

The thought had her stomach lurching up her throat, and she covered her mouth in a feeble attempt to keep from vomiting.

Across the water, two more buckets were dumped overboard as Quinn watched in horror.

Then... oh God.

They heaved Kyle's bloody body into the water. As it bobbed on the rust-colored surface, a piece clicked into place, and renewed acid burned in Geri's stomach.

The men weren't disposing of bodies—they were chumming the water.

That horrifying theory was confirmed in a matter of minutes when movement beneath the water became large gray shapes. Three of them. A triangular dorsal fin pierced the surface. Then another.

The sharks circled the floating chum. They grabbed chunks. Swam away. Came back for more. A fourth joined, and the sharks ate and circled between the boats.

Someone shoved Geri up against the side. She yelped and struggled, but she couldn't get free. Her arms were pinned behind her back. The men leaned her forward enough that her center of gravity teetered precariously over the railing.

On the other boat, Quinn was in a similar predicament, arms pinned by two men as he was held over the edge.

All the terror she'd experienced at Faraway Resort had her well beyond panicking. This time, though, there was also the visceral, primal fear of an apex predator, the bone-deep terror lodging her voice in her throat and darkening her vision at the edges.

The largest of the four sharks surfaced, grabbed Kyle in its jaws, and pulled him under. A moment later, his body floated back up, minus a large chunk of the torso.

Sick with terror, Geri locked eyes with Quinn.

Kevin appeared beside him and exchanged a few words with Tyson.

And then, light glinted off metal a split second before one of the men holding Quinn shoved a long blade deep into his side. Quinn screamed, trying to pull away. The knife was yanked out. Plunged in again. Quinn's cries seemed to echo from everywhere and right through Geri's bones.

Geri thought she heard herself screaming his name. Thought her throat burned from the strain of her voice. But she didn't even feel like she was in her body right then.

The men on the other boat heaved Quinn overboard.

In an instant, the water was churning violently. He thrashed, and when he broke the surface, he cried out, the agony and terror in his voice echoing right through Geri. The sound was cut off when he was yanked back under. The water darkened, the pink foam turning a rusty red. The sound of water splashing had never filled her with so much horror.

This time, she did scream, calling out his name.

After long, terrible seconds, Quinn broke the bloodstained surface again, and the agonized, guttural scream he released would haunt Geri long into her next life. So would the vision of his arm outstretched—hand open as if searching for someone to pull him to safety—just before he was again yanked under.

The water calmed a little, and Quinn surfaced again, trying feebly to swim toward either boat. Or just away from the pain. He called out, but his cries were weak and strained in between the water and blood pouring from his mouth.

Something moved again beneath the water. One of the big shapes. The dorsal fin pierced the surface, and the shark's visage emerged from the crimson water just before it pulled Quinn down, silencing his final cry into a strangled gurgle.

When Quinn came up this time, he was facedown. He wasn't moving. Maybe not

dead, but probably unconscious, which was a small mercy.

Rich's hand landed on her shoulder again. "Well, Ms. Cole. You're the last one standing. Now let's take you home."

Home. Home?

"So I... Does that mean I won?" She looked up at him. "I'm just... going home?"

His grin reminded her of the sharks that had just ripped Quinn to pieces. "Well, with both Mr. Hayworth and Mr. Aimes dead, there won't be two of you returning to the shore." He smirked and half-shrugged. "I guess we'll find out which fate is waiting for you when we get there."

Terror curdled Geri's stomach. All his threats and promises banged around in her head. Prison. Treason. The impossible prospect of returning to the life she'd left behind.

Fuck either of those options.

She grabbed the railing and started to vault over it, but Rich and Mark pulled her back over.

"Let me go!" she screamed. "Let me go! "

They didn't. Once they'd overpowered her, Mark handcuffed her to a seat. For good measure, he cuffed one of her ankles, too. She screamed and sobbed, fighting the cuffs, but she couldn't get free.

She couldn't get off this boat and let the sharks end it all. They wouldn't have ended it quickly, never mind painlessly, but they'd have ended it.

The boat engines fired up again.

They started moving, the hot air turning into a cool wind as they left Quinn and Kyle and the sharks behind.

No escape. No way out. No undoing a thing.

She'd never imagined it was possible to be too scared and too devastated to cry. To even make a sound. To be so shaken all the way to her core that all she could do was sit there, staring out at the sky and the water as hopelessness dug into her bones.

Sometime later—hours, maybe? she'd lost track—something on the horizon began to take shape. Faintly gray at first. Then blue. Then, as they drew closer, green and brown.

Land.

The nightmare was over. She'd survived, which meant she might have won the game, but none of this felt like a victory. Not after bearing witness to horrific cruelty and violent deaths. Even now, she could still hear Quinn's screams and the awful splashing.

He screamed and died over and over in her mind as she got closer to home. As close to home as she'd ever be again. She doubted anything had really changed since she'd been gone, but she had. Profoundly and irreparably.

Over the sounds of Quinn's agonized screams in her mind, she heard his whispered words:

“We're never going home. Not completely.”

Geri squeezed her eyes shut, letting some hot tears fall down her sunburned cheeks.

She'd known in the moment that Quinn was right, but it was only now that she understood how right he'd been.

When the boat docked, she might be met with cops and reporters, every last one of them eager to throw the scandalous story wide open and crucify her in the public eye. Prison would be the best-case scenario because treason would absolutely be on the table. Or maybe she'd set foot on dry land and return to people who loved and respected her, none of them knowing about the deep fakes, about the horrible ordeal she'd survived, or the horrors from which her fortune had risen. She'd return to the comfort and safety of the life she'd always known, carrying with her only the trauma of a reality no one would ever believe and bearing the crushing weight of more shame and regret than she could carry.

She'd either be destroyed publicly, financially, and legally for the path of destruction she and her family had left in their wake. Or she'd resume living that life, buoyed by the bloody money from the violent empire she'd helped to build.

She didn't want to die, but the two possible futures awaiting her onshore would be their own flavors of hell.

And there was no escape.