



Sara Adams only wants a Spring Break with surf, sun, friends and fun, but she finds more than she expects. After falling overboard from her tour boat during a squall, she wakes up on a deserted island in the Bermuda Triangle.

However, the island isn't as deserted as she first thinks. A handsome stranger brings her food that couldn't possibly grow there; but he always disappears at night and when it rains. Something tells her he isn't what he appears, but ancient forces and her fear of the ocean stand in the way of satisfying her heart.

At The Water's Edge
By
Melanie Nilles

At The Water's Edge is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters, names, places, or incidents to reality is pure coincidence.

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TIGER BORN

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Part 1: The Island

Drowning

The boat rocked on the increasingly ugly waves, which sprayed up and soaked her more than the sprinkling of rain just starting. Wet hair stuck to her back and around her face, looking brown more than the highlighted golden brown it normally was.

Sara's fingers tightened on the metal rail at the bow, her eyes on the dark sky and the whitecaps frothing angrily around them.

Why, oh, why hadn't she stayed with her friend Stacy?

Because she was Sara Adams of Casper, Wyoming, and had to go on a tour to see the legendary Bermuda Triangle for herself. Stacy, meanwhile, was probably sitting on a lounge chair on a hot, sandy beach, sipping a real Bahama Mama in the Bahamas and flirting with the servers.

She, Sara, was out on a boat in the middle of a predator-infested ocean lurching on increasingly higher waves from a sudden squall that had come up without warning.

She was going to die. Wouldn't that make them sorry for saying she never did anything adventurous? That would show them.

Yeah. Right.

And Stacy would return to school after a memorable spring break, bragging about her new tan and all the guys who hit on her.

She should have stuck to her quiet life and ignored her ex's harsh words about her being dull and boring just because she wanted to wait to "prove" her love for him until they were married.

Damn him! His words still haunted her a month after breaking up.

After all the heart-racing, stomach-wrenching tossing of the boat, she never wanted to visit the Caribbean again. Her life had been satisfying. She didn't need excitement.

One of the two men who rented out the boat for sightseeing came up beside her. A light mustache sprinkled with gray and matching the hair sticking out from under his cap contrasted what seemed to be a permanent reddish brown of leathery skin. He called himself Captain Bob, only because he didn't want to give out his real name. "Come below, Miss. You don't want to stay out here."

"No! I'm not letting go." From "below", she could see through the windows of the sightseeing vessel, a fairly modern boat recommended by their travel agent, something less likely to sink in troubled waters; but she didn't want to let go and get tossed overboard. The deck was wet from water spraying up, so she clung white-knuckled to the rail, afraid of letting go.

The boat pitched towards a blue-green wall. Captain Bob clung to the rail beside her, his orange life vest strapped on like hers. He'd ordered it as soon as his first mate spotted the storm several miles out. It had hit faster than he'd expected.

Lightning flashed nearby. She flinched at the almost instantaneous peal of thunder.

"Inside. Now!" He grabbed her and pulled back.

Oh, dear God. Swallowing her fear, she let go of the rail and let Captain Bob guide her on the swaying ship around the cabin to the door at the back. The *Nauti Or Nice* tipped up with a wave so that Sara slid along the slippery deck, her hands out to catch something.

"Hold on, Miss!"

The ship pitched the other way and she saw the wave rush up and grab her.

"Miss Sara!" Captain Bob's voice reached her from the boat, which drew away.

"Come back!" she called.

A whitecap churned over her, dipping her below the surface. Panicked for air, she kicked and paddled to reach the surface again. Once there, she gasped and coughed from the horribly salty water, and wiped hair from her face to see the boat farther away.

"Don't leave me!"

Scenes from movies and news reports of people lost at sea flashed through her head. *I don't want to be a statistic. God, help me.*

She was supposed to graduate with her degree in English and maybe go into teaching. Sea stories were great, but she didn't want to *live* one.

It all passed in a second when the water crashed over her again.

She imagined sharks circling hungrily. *No. No. No. No. No. Please. Someone save me.*

The violent waves carried the boat farther away and threatened to drown her. Each time she was pushed under and returned for air, she expected the next breath to be her last.

Why did she ever want to visit the stupid Bermuda Triangle?

She hated the ocean. She hated Brad and his demoralizing cruelty.

The ocean hated her. The rising water coming for her loomed ominously and crashed over her, pushing her down deep, deep, deep... Her lungs burned to burst. She needed air.

The urge to breathe forced air from her lungs, but water poured in, choking her. She tried to cough, but sucked in more. Panic passed through her in a brief instant of realizing she would drown.

In the last second before darkness overcame her, she thought something wrapped around her and something else attached to her mouth.

The Mysterious Island

Warmth. Like she did when lying on her bed on a bright morning with the sun pouring through her window, she basked in the heat.

Sara smiled and rolled onto her back, like a cat soaking up the rays. She missed her mother's cat. The old ginger queen would stretch out in the sun and purr in luxury.

Gritty sand shifted under her.

Sand?

She opened her eyes and quickly lifted a hand to block the sun shining from a clear sky, and reached out with her other hand. Fingers closed around hot sand.

Startled, she rolled over and looked around.

The beach ended a few feet away, where tropical plants started. The giant leaves of palm trees swayed high above in a warm ocean breeze.

She was alive!

Or this was all an elaborate dream.

Ocean water lapped at her ankles occasionally, leaving her shoes still soaked. She pulled her legs up under her and stood to get a better view.

The island cut off to the left and curved around to the right. Had she made it back to civilization? How?

The alternative made her cringe. Was it only a dream before she died of drowning?

Her stomach growled. That felt real enough to move her feet. She needed food or at least in her dream, she needed food.

Food awaited her. A variety of fruits were stacked at the base of the nearest tree. Odd was an understatement.

"Hello?" She peered into the shadows, searching for the person who had left them. First rescue, then food ready and waiting. This had to be a dream.

Or she wasn't alone.

A search could wait. Her stomach grumbled to hurry to the food. She fell to her knees in the sand and picked up a mango. Not her favorite, but she didn't recognize the others. Besides, she was starved. Maybe she could imagine it was a big juicy hamburger.

Not quite with the tough skin that broke two nails to tear into it, but it filled her stomach.

She was thirsty, though, too. Finding fresh water would be a priority. With luck, she could imagine a fully stocked bar, but she had never been good at lucid dreaming. She'd be suffering soon if she didn't find fresh water. Although the fruit helped, it wouldn't be enough. Too bad her mysterious dream beneficiary hadn't thought of that too.

Sara picked up a few of the pimpled and smooth fruits and stuffed the smaller ones in her shorts pockets. She carried what she could and headed into the jungle. The only water she'd likely find along the beach was saltwater. To find something drinkable, she'd have to head inland. Besides, maybe she'd actually find civilization so she could return home.

In squishy wet shoes she dared not remove, she made her way into the foliage. Tall grassy blades brushed against her. Fanlike leaves and palm trees shaded the sandy soil. As she made her way further in, the soil grew more secure under her feet and soft. Tall grasses sprouted from actual soil and the land seemed to be slanting upwards. Up was good. From the looks of it, she would reach a rocky ledge within the day. It wasn't a terribly small island, but it probably wasn't large, unless more lay beyond that ledge.

Occasional birds twittered or cawed overhead and in the distance, but otherwise, only insects interrupted the silence.

A mouse scurried away, so the island had some life on it. Hopefully nothing poisonous.

She shuddered and pushed through the foliage to a clearing. The soft tinkle of water over stones halted her to listen.

Definitely water, and straight ahead!

She licked her lips and ran through the tall grass to the source of the sound. *Please be fresh...*

A trickle of water flowed from a mossy ledge.

Sara hesitated, but her thirst got the best of her. She cupped her hands to catch the water and put it to her lips for a small test.

Fresh!

Her prayers were answered. She drank until her stomach sloshed from water and sat back on the warm grass.

Fresh water and fruit. Not much, but it was something. She could survive on that.

After some time resting by the small pool at the base of the rock face, she climbed up the hill to get a view of the island.

The hill wasn't big, but from the top, she could see that the island had ample resources. A good thing, because she might be there awhile. However, she saw no sign of another person, but they could be out of sight somewhere.

Sara stared at the blue around her. Such gorgeous beaches! Too bad Stacy wasn't there, and a couple of cabana boys to serve them.

Disappointment sagged her shoulders. Stacy. Was her friend even searching? Had the ship made it back to port? How much time had passed?

Would she make it back? She had a paper due in Intermediate Comp, and a test in Philosophy just a couple days after spring break ended. Even if she was rescued in time, she'd never be ready.

She was trapped on a tropical island or, as all the literature would point out, alone on a deserted island, without even knowing how she had gotten there.

Was that a dolphin tail that splashed in the darker waters to her left? Next time she wanted to see dolphins, she'd suggest a vacation to Sea World. For that matter, on her next spring break, she'd stay inland, as far from the ocean as possible.

Now she understood what made the Bermuda Triangle such a horrible place. She was alone.

The weight of it crashed over her, sinking her down into the grass of her island, her lonely, stinking island. No sister. No mother to comfort her. No friends to keep her occupied. No guys to flirt with. Not a stupid professor to at least argue with about her grades. Not even an animal to keep her company. *Why me?*

Emotions clogged her throat and burned her eyes with tears. Never in her life had she felt so alone.

After a short pity party, she wiped her eyes and looked around at brush and grass and palm trees in the sands below.

"What have you done, Sara?"

She lifted a strange fruit up with a yellow pimpled skin. She'd seen them in the market but couldn't remember the name. Where had it come from?

Where had it all come from? Had it washed ashore with her?

Who cared. She bit into the fruit and nearly gagged at the unusual taste. *Beggars can't be choosers.* It was food, good or bad. She nibbled on it but dared not toss it.

The object there would be survival. She'd learned something from Brad, which was better than nothing. She had a source of fresh water. Her next priority was finding more food, then shelter because, sooner or later, it would rain. She didn't like being drenched.

Or wearing stiff clothes. She'd never wished for a washing machine more than then. Her short-sleeved shirt and shorts had stiffened from drying after the saltwater soak. It wasn't the end of the world, but it wasn't pleasant.

If only she hadn't been so keen on seeing the Bermuda Triangle.

She laid back and thought of Stacy relaxing in the sun with a cool drink, going off to party all night, maybe doing some shopping at the local shops. If only she had listened to Stacy.

* * *

Evening came too soon, and with it, the hunger and loneliness. Strange sounds kept Sara alert, despite her fatigue. She hadn't even been able to make a fire. In only shorts and a tee shirt, she wasn't exactly dressed to keep herself warm.

Thank goodness the tropics didn't get too cold at night. It would have been freezing at night way up north, at home. She missed her older sister and her parents, even her ex. Even he would be preferable to being alone, and that was saying something. On second thought, maybe she was better off alone.

Sara stared out over the ocean as the bright round disk of sun sank into the watery horizon. A whole day gone. Night came. Hopefully the island was too small for any nocturnal creatures to come slithering or crawling out to get her.

She shuddered and pulled her knees up to her chin.

"Misery loves company. Forget it, Sara. You're alone." Even her own sarcastic humor didn't make her feel better.

She needed sleep, if it was possible. The sand was still warm next to the trees along the beach. Using her arm as a pillow, she lay down on her side and closed her eyes.

There was one benefit of being there—she didn't need a recording to hear waves washing gently on the shore.

She drifted off into strange dreams of fish and endless blackness with thoughts of it being the end, when a tickle on her cheek roused her.

Thinking she was still dreaming, she ignored it and tried to go back to sleep.

A loud splash jerked her awake.

Stars sprinkled the sky to the west, but the sky lightened in the east. Dawn approached.

Somewhere in the blue, a dolphin's tail surfaced. Maybe one day she'd get up the courage to swim with it, but not that day.

All of it meant she was still on the cursed island. Dreaming or real, it didn't matter. She was stuck there.

And hungry.

She needed more food.

Sara groaned at the prospects and sat up.

"This sucks."

Wait a minute.

She did a double take.

Food! A bunch of it piled on a palm leaf within reach. She leaned over and picked up a pile of—

"No way." Red, ripe strawberries!

Sara eyed them warily. "All right, Stacy! You can come out now!"

Birds squawked above. *Someone* had left the food for her. Or she really was dreaming and had made it happen by thinking about it.

Maybe if she imagined hard enough, she could make people appear, one of them a server bearing a nice juicy steak.

She closed her eyes and wished with all her heart, noting the regular washing of the waves on the shore and the birds stirring overhead.

Sara opened her eyes to the same pile of food, which included far more than yesterday. But no steak. No friends. Nothing else.

"Oh, well." She ate all that she could. As her hunger abated, she sat back and searched around her, but heard nothing indicating movement. "Thank you! Whoever you are!" she called out. At least she wouldn't go hungry.

Next up was water, and she knew where to find that.

After grabbing some fruits for the trek, she headed into the foliage. She had survived sleeping one night there. The island had to be safe; at the least the logic made sense to her. A trip around the whole of the island would give her a better idea of its size. Besides, someone was helping her. They had to be hiding somewhere there, or maybe they had a boat waiting. Why wouldn't they wake her, though? Was it some sort of joke?

Or was someone else stuck there with her who was afraid to show themselves?

Creepy. She had a stalker, if one could call a fellow prisoner of a deserted island who just wanted to share their food a stalker. For that matter, maybe she would find their garden or wherever they raised all of those fruits.

With the sun lighting through the trees, she headed into them for the spring she had found yesterday. The new day brought new determination and ideas. Confident that she would have food, she decided that her next priority was shelter. Sooner or later, rain would come and who knew what else. After all, she was in an area that was hurricane prone.

She could also use something in which to collect fresh water.

And she'd need meat to keep up her strength; volleyball and basketball in high school had taught her how to train and how to eat as an athlete. Although she'd never learned how, maybe she could teach herself to fish.

So many considerations and inconveniences.

She reached the rocky ledge where the spring emerged. After sating her thirst, she climbed the hill and looked around again. Something bobbed in the water and disappeared, probably her dolphin friend.

At least she wasn't totally alone. Maybe she'd get to meet her friendly companion, if she worked up the nerve to swim. If he stuck around, she might even give him a name. How many people had their own dolphin pet?

Ah, the power of trying to stay positive.

No sign of rescue anywhere, but that didn't mean she had to just sit and wait. It could be days before anyone found her. She'd have to make the most of her time.

And that time would be best used checking out her home and gathering what she'd need to make it a home. Although she could see the whole island from that point, she'd need to get up close to find anything useful.

What if someone was out there?

She shuddered at the possibilities, but they already knew she was there and hadn't hurt her. She cupped her hands around her mouth and let out a long "Halloo!" After waiting for an answer that never came, she tried again. Still, no answer.

"Time for a walk." She resigned to search the hard way and climbed down the opposite side of the hill and into the foliage.

More grasses and palm trees, some brush, and a few other tree types; but no fruit trees. Where did the food come from? How would she find more?

How would she ever build any sort of shelter? Those trees were tall. Maybe she could break off some branches.

Sara took a hold of one of the branches of a tree with small fat leaves near the stem and pushed down. It didn't budge. She applied more force but still nothing. When she put her full weight on it, the branch bent to droop but didn't break.

"Damn it!"

She kicked at the branch with a huff of indignation. "This is never going to work." There had to be something else she could use.

In crossing the island, she came out at a different end of the beach. From there, she resigned to walk the full perimeter of the island while crunching on one of the fruits she had brought along from that morning's stash.

"This is the *worst*. Vacation. Ever!" She'd die to be back in her classes at the university. "No more cutting class. No more staying up late. No more worrying about dating. I will appreciate my lousy retail job. I will study hard. Please, please, *please*, God, get me off this stupid island."

She looked up but saw only a bird floating lazily on the breeze.

"If someone is listening, please help me!" She shouted to the sky but no one answered. Whoever had left the fruit must have been listening, but where did they hide?

In misery, she returned to where she had awakened. Two trees growing close to form a V with one drooping out over the surf looked familiar. The remaining fruit definitely looked familiar.

The walk around the island had only added to her misery with the discovery that she couldn't even break any branches to help herself, except for small twigs, which she couldn't even use to build a fire, because she didn't know how to light it without matches.

The dream was turning into a nightmare.

Strange Tidings

All right. Something was going on. *Three* days in a row?

And, on top of the food waiting for her, she thought she'd heard the most melodious voice singing in her dreams. Never had she heard a masculine voice of such range.

This morning, not only was fruit set aside for her, but also a dagger with a leather-wrapped handle twisted with a fine gold rope and—ow!—a sharp edge.

She stuck her finger in her mouth to suck the blood and grimaced at the metallic taste, while searching around her for the source of this gift.

It was a very nice blade, if she could say so with her nonexistent experience. A lot like a double-edged knife or miniature sword. She'd read about such things in books but had never actually seen anything like it, much less thought she would ever handle one.

"Come out, whoever you are!" she called. This was no coincidence and way too convenient. "I mean it! Whoever's hiding, show yourself!"

Nothing.

Who was leaving these care packages for her?

"It's not funny! If you can help me, get me off this island!"

Still no answer.

Sara used the dagger to cut into some of the fruits and leaf bundles. Upon unfolding one of the leaves, she made a startling discovery—cooked fish. All right. The joke was over. She'd find the person doing this if she had to search all night.

Or, she thought with a sly grin, if she had to stay awake all night. Yes. They left the food overnight. Unless they were incorporeal, she would catch them in the act.

They had to be hiding somewhere on that island. It wasn't big enough to get lost.

She blinked at the obvious thought. Duh! Why not look for footprints?

It was better than sitting around there all day doing nothing.

After filling her stomach, she took as much as she could carry—she really needed some sort of knapsack or purse to carry it with her—and proceeded to the spring for a morning drink. There, she sat in the grass to rest a while and searched around her, willing to bet her life that whoever kept leaving her the gifts was watching her. She sat quietly and listened to the birds and the buzz of insects, hoping to catch a hint of someone nearby.

Wind rustled through grass, but nothing else disturbed the peace. So much for that idea.

Sara rose and continued back to the shore along a different path to walk around the hill and see areas she hadn't yet explored up close. The dagger would come in useful for cutting branches, she'd bet, but so would another capable body, unless this was all an elaborate dream or near-death experience. She still hadn't ruled that out.

She reached an area of rocky shoreline with large pillars of stone about twenty feet out. She'd seen them from the hill but hadn't thought much of them, given that they were at the edge of the darker blue, where the seafloor fell away. After walking a ways on the beach but seeing no sign of footprints, she returned to the trees to continue her search.

Sure, she wasn't a tracker and had no experience, but she was determined to make up something to do and at least try.

The effort brought nothing but frustration, until she sat down at the base of a tree and started sawing at the nearest branch with the dagger.

"Come on." It didn't have as much of an effect as she had hoped. "Cut already." She adjusted her position to put more force into it, but she seemed to barely make a dent in the branch.

"What good are you if you won't cut anything but my finger!" She stabbed the tip deep into the soil with a growl and sat back against the tree.

She hated this! All of it. She wished with all her heart that she could just die of drowning and be done with it all, but nothing changed.

The warm sun touched her hand exposed from the shade where she sat and she pulled it back. No sense getting sunburned when she didn't have anything to protect her fair skin.

Grass rustled to her right, and not like the tropical breeze would. This was a sudden spurt of rustle that ended just as quickly.

I have you now. At last!

She'd have to be careful if she hoped to catch her islandmate.

Despite the pounding of her heart to react, Sara leaned back with her arms across her chest and pretended to rest, hoping the person would come within easy sight if she opened her eyes. Hopefully it wasn't something else there to hurt her, but if it was, she would be surprised. She should have found danger already by the third day, or maybe not.

She breathed to calm herself and waited.

After a while, the rustle reached her again. Someone or something moved nearby, but she continued to wait, hoping they might come within sight. From the sound on her right, they probably hid from her. If it was her rescuer, they might be waiting for her to sleep, like they did at night when they left all the food for her to find in the morning.

She could wait, but hardly.

Small rustles of grass sounded like someone taking steps. She forced herself to breathe slowly, as if sleeping. *A little closer. Just come out to face me.* Impatience grated on her nerves, but she could do this.

The rustle sounded closer. She opened her eyes a slit and saw a shadow move from that direction. It was upright, like a person, but it would have to be a person, she reasoned, to leave a dagger and food she could eat. Her pulse quickened.

Just a little closer. Let me see you.

After what seemed an eternity, the soft swish of grass sounded closer, giving her the impression of someone moving with caution.

She could hardly stand waiting. *Patience, Sara.*

She dared to open her eyes to slits and made out the shape of a bare-chested man squatting only about a yard away. Golden hair brushed his shoulders and blue eyes sparkled like the sea. Those eyes widened, and he sprang away.

"Wait!"

She jumped to her feet but halted a step later at the thought of leaving the dagger. What if he was dangerous?

Cursing herself for her failure at patience and for her forgetfulness, she retrieved the dagger and sprinted after him. Although he had a head start, he left a direct trail through the brush and onto sandy soil straight to the water's edge.

There, she'd have him. Where could he go but out to sea? If he did swim away, he'd have to come back sooner or later.

"Stop!"

He was swift, but she'd been an athlete and stayed in shape. Her long strides closed the distance.

"Wait! I want to talk to you!"

His shape cleared the palm trees ahead.

"Wait! I won't hurt you! Stop!"

She cleared the trees as he halted.

"Wait! I won't hurt you." There was an irony. If anyone could do the hurting, it was him.

The man looked at her, his skin as pale as anyone of northern European descent, not what she would have expected for someone trapped on that island with her in the Caribbean. Wavy, golden locks brushed his broad, strong shoulders. Most striking was the short skirt-like covering over his loins, although she reasoned that someone stuck on an island might not have much else for clothes after some time.

However, he wasn't hairy in the least on his body or chin and each breath he took accentuated a fit body. All right, so he was a treat to look at, or maybe she imagined it out of desperation.

He wore a short necklace of what appeared to be serrated shark teeth, and something sparkly at the middle of them that seemed out of place. How strange, like the dagger in her hand.

The dagger...ornately styled and very sharp.

"Did you leave this for me?" She turned it around in her hand. "Thank you."

He backed away from her along the beach, his hands up before him as if afraid.

Was it the dagger?

"I won't hurt you. See?" She set it down slowly and stepped towards him, so it lay behind her in the sand, while finding it disconcerting that he would be so afraid of her.

He seemed to relax, though, and stared at her. Ocean blue eyes penetrated her core, as if he looked deeper than the surface.

"Who are you? How long have you been here? What do you want from me? Why do you run away?" Questions burst out before she could slow down to give him a chance to answer, which he didn't do. His eyes wandered to the ocean for several seconds before returning to her. "Do you even understand me?"

His brow furrowed.

Slowly, she moved closer while talking. "My name is Sara. I'm all alone on this island and would like to get home, but...you're the first person I've seen since I was drowning, and I don't know if this is real or part of an elaborate dream, or what. I just want to get home." She stopped within five or six feet of him, but he seemed confused. "You don't understand, do you?"

It was hopeless. There had to be some way to communicate.

Maybe...

She patted her chest and said, "Sara," repeating the gesture and name a few times, then pointing to him with the expectation that he would understand.

"Darian," he said.

Well, at least he talked and understood simple gestures. It was a start.

Sara sighed and let her shoulders drop. "Darian."

He smiled, a handsome smile, but he probably was a dream to look so perfect with that sculpted, hairless body. Brad had never looked that good. The only thing to make Darian a perfect physical specimen would be a nice reddish brown tint to his skin, but her dreams were never perfect.

"All right, Darian. I guess we're both stuck here, wherever here is. I don't know why you're so afraid, but I'm not going to hurt you."

He said something in a strange language and she shook her head. "I have no idea what you just said, but as long as we're on this island together, we might as well try to figure things out. Right?"

She offered her hand to him. Hesitant at first, he reached out and clasped it in a light grip that put her mind at ease. He could have attacked her at any time the last few days, but he had left food out for her and hidden. She felt more at ease, and he seemed to relax more too.

"Stay?" She motioned to a shady place along the beach under the trees and took a step. He glanced out to sea but turned back and joined her in sitting.

"Can you understand anything I say?" She spoke slowly.

He frowned and shrugged.

"Well. This could take a while." How did one communicate with another when neither had any understanding of each other's spoken languages?

They had to start somewhere. Nouns seemed the most logical start. Actions could come second. Maybe somewhere along the line, they would understand each other.

She grabbed a handful of the gritty sand and let it sift through her fingers. "Sand."

"Sand," he repeated. Darian grabbed a handful himself and let it sift through as she did.

"*Tual*."

"*Tual*?"

The corner of his mouth crooked up. "Sand. *Tual*."

Ah. She got it. He was teaching her as she taught him. "*Tual*."

That charming smile made his eyes sparkle. Maybe being stuck on that island wasn't so bad after all.

* * *

The day passed far more quickly with company than the last two had alone. Darian proved to be adept at using the dagger and handy at helping her to build a shelter. With his help—and a lot of admiration for those muscles rippling while he bent and cut off branches of the large leaves to cover the small lean-to they managed to build together—they built a shelter near the spring. In all of it, she learned more words of his language while he picked up words in English.

He shared her stash of fruit and fish while sitting on the west beach and watching the sun set with her.

She looked aside at him. No way could he be for real. This all had to be a very good dream.

"Thank you for all your help today, Darian."

He blinked at her, his skin taking on a warm sheen in the light of the disappearing sun.

"Thank you." Although he didn't understand, it at least made her feel better to say it. Tonight, they could each sleep easier.

He nodded, but by the blank look in his eyes, he didn't understand. In time, that would come. At least that day had been productive, and she was tired from it.

Sara stared out at the shimmering water, the weight of the day's activity pushing her lids down. She yawned and stretched. "Time for bed."

She stood and waited for him. He'd been nothing less than considerate of her all day, never invading her personal space and always offering to help, with much of the shelter coming from his initiative. She'd hardly had to try to break branches or retrieve leaves. Once she showed him with her body language exactly what she wanted, he went ahead and started the process. She had only to join him, which was so opposite what she'd gone through with her ex. Darian had proven himself to be too good to be true.

"Coming?"

He rose and dusted sand from his legs, but didn't follow her into the trees. She stopped and looked back. "Darian?" He wasn't going to hide again, was he? She didn't want to be alone.

He put a palm up to her.

"*Kui moniel.*" He said nothing else, but bowed and walked away.

Wait. Where was he going? A part of her panicked and she ran after him. "Darian?"

He paused and glanced out to sea, then met her eyes with a gentle smile. "Sleep, Sara," he said.

"What about you?"

He gazed at her for a while and finally shook his head. "Sleep. Shelter. Sara." The words came out with hesitation, but she thought she knew what he meant—he hadn't answered her question.

"You're not leaving me again, are you?" She didn't want to be left alone all night.

He shook his head and walked away along the beach.

"Darian?"

He turned and motioned as if to shoo her away.

Disappointment welled up inside her. After all they'd done that day, he was dismissing her. Upset by the sudden change, she turned and ran through the trees to the makeshift shelter.

Idiot. All men are the same.

No. She did not like him. He was just a hot guy on the beach in a horrible dream.

But he was her only company and she was lonely.

Go to sleep and forget it. None of it's real. Small consolation, but she closed her eyes and let the trickle of the spring and the distant rush of the waves coax her into dreams of home.

Deep Blue

The last clasp on the dark green jacket could stay open. Darian hated formalities, but he dared not present himself to the Lady Guardian in his swimwear. If she disliked his disregard for formal attire, she could dismiss him. *She* had requested his presence, after all.

He knew what she would say and had practiced his answers already.

After a quick brush through his hair, he stepped out from his room and marched through the crystalline-grown corridor and down a staircase winding to the next lower level, the balustrade glittering under the glow of the scattered hexagonal sections above. Several individuals passed him and he acknowledged each with a gracious smile.

At the bottom, he passed through another corridor and a door, which disintegrated before him and re-integrated behind him.

A woman in a flowing red gown with golden hair tied up turned from a glass dome overlooking other domed areas of the city tiered down the cliff into the midnight blue of the ocean water. Fish swam by, along with a few squid.

The lady glided towards him with a smile that wasn't all pleased. ["Darian."]

He bowed at her approach. ["Mother."]

["I was worried. You've been missing for hours."] She brushed past him to reach the pedestal in the center of the chamber.

She placed her hand on the orb at the top and several images sprang to life in the air around her. ["I searched everywhere, but you were nowhere in the city."]

He grimaced, but wiped it from his face before turning. Here it came—the argument he had dreaded. Fierce as she was against the land-people, Lady Riona of Adronis was still his mother, but with a very peculiar soft spot he could manipulate.

["No, I wasn't. I was fixing a problem you caused."]

She blinked, her blue eyes meeting his with an innocent expression. ["Oh?"]

Very coy, but she couldn't fool him. ["Your storm, mother. The storm you caused."]

["The land-people came too close. I had to protect our city."]

["It was a small boat."] Curse her acting so nonchalant! The woman, Sara, suffered for nothing than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. ["They could not have had the equipment to find us this deep. You could have let them pass."]

Uh, oh. Those eyes pierced him with an unspoken accusation. ["How would you know?"]

He wished he could be anywhere but there right then, but he'd prepared for it. He'd known it was coming, but that didn't make it any easier to face. ["I was there. I was examining Sector Two when their boat crossed over our waters. It was just a small tourist boat. I've seen it before."]

One sharp-edged eyebrow lifted. ["You've been outside our territory again. I warned you to stay out of sight. The land-people are destructive and deceitful. They have no regard for this world."]

She let out a sigh and new images replaced the others, images of green land. Sorrow softened her face. ["Our ancestors came to this world to escape persecution, but the enemy followed them. For over three hundred thousand years, this world has been ours, the old enemy punished by being genetically blended with the apes and other creatures of this world so they could not harm us. It was a kindness to them that they still had some identity, too kind. In the last ten thousand years, they've been changing faster than ever, returning to what they were."]

The same speech again. When would she realize it didn't work on him anymore? ["They were *us*. We were them. Our ancestors transformed theirs to punish them. And we...we did nothing

but hide and transform ourselves to suit this environment. Were they any better? We've lost over a dozen cities, at least according to our historical records. Adronis and Emphali are the last two remaining. Our ancestors cursed us to wither in a decreasing gene pool. Sooner or later, we must confront the land-people and accept them. Surely, not all are wild and dangerous."

At least, Sara seemed kind and honest, albeit scared. Giving her the dagger for her needs had not given her cause to attack him.

His mother's finger twitched on the orb and the images disappeared. Those blue eyes raged in a tempest much like the one she had administered to turn back the boat. ["What is this fascination with the land-people, Darian?"]

["I won't let you harm them."]

["Them—"] She brought up an image of the island and his breath stuck in his chest as it showed him and Sara on the beach. ["Or her?"]

["I saved her from drowning in *your* storm."]

She fumed, speechless in her lost composure, and he took the advantage.

["If you so much as threaten her, I will leave our waters and go to the land-people myself."]

["You wouldn't!"]

The panic in her face gave him confidence, but he wasn't bluffing. ["I would."]

["You're the only heir! You can't leave Adronis."]

At the sincere worry on her face, he took her hands in his to calm her. ["And I would do all that is right for our people, nothing less."] He led her to the dome and gazed out.

["Our people are deteriorating. You know it. Father knew it. That is why he sought possibilities with the land-people."] His voice quivered at the end; his father had died in an accident caused by the land-people, but he had been determined to find those who had achieved a higher state of rational thinking rather than selfish destructiveness.

["The land-people poison the ocean. It's dying."]

["The Earth changes all the time, and will renew itself, but *we* can't without changing. We adapted to this, and we can adapt further. I think...maybe it's time we try to understand them and give them a chance to prove themselves worthy."]

["What do we need to understand? We see their images—war, violence, cruelty. They have returned to their origins."]

["Some are different."]

She eyed him warily. ["This girl?"]

["Maybe. She didn't attack me, even when given the opportunity. Give me a chance to learn about her and..."] He shrugged for lack of words and squeezed her hands briefly. ["Spare her, mother, and I will be forever grateful."]

In a point of emphasis and affection, he kissed her cheek. Her posture melted into concession. ["One moon, no more."]

["Thank you."]

She shook her head and lifted his hands before her. ["You be careful, my son."]

["As always, mother."] He smiled and let go, backing away several steps before turning and departing the chamber.

Now for some rest, then Sara. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of returning to her.

Disquieting Thoughts

Dreams saturated the night, strange twists and turns of the life she had known on campus, until Darian walked through the commons; but when she caught up to him, he identified himself as one of her professors and suddenly wore a suit and tie.

Disappointed, Sara wandered away into another dream, but one surreal and enchanting in a peaceful land where the wind sang to her with a gentle voice.

Morning interrupted with the intrusion of the loud caw of a bird somewhere. The trickle of the spring and the hard ground beneath her meant she was still on the island.

Sara rolled onto her back and stared at the branches with the large leaves secured around them and sighed. Yup. Still on her lonely island.

Had Darian been real? Why had he left her? Had she done something wrong? Where was he?

Men! Sara rolled onto her side and stared at the spring, fuming about the whole situation, not just Darian. It figured that she'd be stuck on a lonely island—not deserted—and the only human besides her would be a man who didn't want to have much to do with her. Never mind that he had spent the whole day with her.

She couldn't stay mad, though.

So, she'd made contact with the person leaving her food, and he'd helped her build that little shelter. Who knew how long he'd lived alone. He was probably shy after so long. She shouldn't blame him for needing time alone.

All right. So, she'd go easy on him. He'd been kind to her.

The gurgle of her stomach made her grimace and wish for food. Wherever Darian found it, she hoped he brought more soon. She only had a small melon of some sort left from yesterday's offering.

She sat up and cut into it rather clumsily with the dagger. A serrated blade would have made better progress, but at least she had something.

While she enjoyed the sweet fruit, Darian appeared, bearing an armload of more food.

Relief to see him passed through her like a gentle reprieve. She swallowed her mouthful and smiled. "Darian! I'm so glad you came back."

He smiled and dropped the fruit next to her. Not only fruit, but fish, already prepped and cooked. Meat! Something more filling than fruit. She picked up a pink filet-sized chunk from the bundle in the leaves and put it to her mouth. Cooled, but cooked. It wasn't exactly gourmet, but she longed for something to satisfy her hunger more completely than the fruit had and that fit the bill.

He sat down, his eyes on her so that she became self-conscious suddenly of acting like a pig. She lowered the fish and motioned him to the pile. "I'm sorry. Are you hungry?"

He shook his head, and pointed from the pile to her in a clear gesture that she should take what she wanted. "*Dae na*," he said.

Dae na. Eat? *Na ti* meant food, from what they had established yesterday. Assuming that's what he meant, she took a bite of the fish. Dry but tasty. It made her thirsty. Luckily, the spring was right there. She finished the filet and satisfied her thirst.

While she returned to her place next to where he sat, his smile warmed through her with embarrassment.

She halted and frowned. "What?"

His eyes met hers with a hint of amusement and maybe admiration. Whatever it was, it made her self-conscious so that she searched her clothes and body for something that might have caused it.

"You...*So nawite konseyan.*"

"I have no idea what you just said."

His smile crooked up, frustrating her more. She hurried to sit down and eat and forget the whole thing. Had he insulted her or flattered her or commented on the weather? Only he knew.

Sara busied herself with filling her stomach, but he insisted on interrupting to point to each fruit and give it a name. The language had a beautiful, flowing quality to it. Although she didn't understand him, she could listen to him speak all day.

And he did speak, learning her words and expressing himself in his own. They talked most of the day, often sitting but also sometimes walking along the beach—she hoped to see a boat or plane or something, but realized she had no way to signal, except for the smooth side of the dagger, which could be used to reflect sunlight. When the thought passed through her mind, she realized she'd need to keep it on her for such an occasion. She'd need a sheath to protect herself from cuts, but wasn't sure how to go about making one with the materials available. In the end, she left the dagger by the shelter.

At sunset, they sat on the beach and watched it sink into the ocean, which lit up in the orange glow like fire.

In the afterglow of dusk, he stood and offered her a hand. She took it and welcomed him pulling her to her feet. She stood close to him, her eyes drawn to the lean, sculpted body with the awareness of a desire growing in her, which she tried to dismiss as fear that she would never know civilization again.

"And to think you were too shy to show yourself just a few days ago." She blinked and looked up to the charming smile and the depth of an old soul in his eyes. There was something about him she couldn't place, something more that couldn't yet break the language barrier. She wanted to know more about him—where was he from originally? How had he arrived on that island? How long had he been there? So much more. But she couldn't yet. It frustrated her to want to know while being unable to satisfy her curiosity.

They learned some words of each other's language, but understanding would take time.

Time. Her heart darkened like the sky. "I suppose you'll be leaving again."

"Sleep, Sara." He released his hold on her hand, but she grasped his hand in hers, holding his gaze in desperation.

"Stay, Darian. Don't go, wherever you go to hide."

Shadows moved along his jaw and he stared across the water.

"Please. Don't leave me like this. I know we don't know each other well, but I don't like being left alone. Please stay."

He let out a heavy sigh and took her hand in his. "Go. Sleep...I...Sun?"

What did he mean? The answer clicked into place from what she'd seen the last two days, or she hoped she was right. "You'll return in the daylight, when the sun comes up?" She passed her free hand in an arc from east to west, trying to mimic the movement of the sun in the sky.

He gave a nod. "*Saia.*"

"Yes?" She hoped that's what he meant.

A lopsided smile made it hard for her to say good night. How had she lucked out to find an island inhabited only by a gentleman who had a body she could admire? This had to be a dream,

but if it was, she would make sure he stayed all night to keep her company. Waiting for morning would be hard to do.

"Sleep, Sara," he said again.

"All right. I'll try, but only if you promise to return in the morning."

He gave a light squeeze of her hand and released it. "Sleep. Shelter."

She stood for a few seconds, but he waited with an air of expectation.

Finally, she relented and stepped into the foliage, but halted after a few steps and looked back. Darian's smile curved up wryly. "Go."

Fine. She stepped through the grasses brushing her bare legs and made her way to the spring, where she cupped her hands to drink. She was thirsty anyway after talking for so long, even if they had circled back to the spring a few times for water.

She sat back and pulled off her shoes and socks for the night. She hated going barefoot, but the shoes were sandy and her socks were filthy, even if she had removed them each day. She didn't want to think about the rest of her clothes and how disgusting they must be. Sooner or later, she'd have to take a swim, but the pool at the base of the spring wasn't more than a foot deep and she didn't want to swim in the ocean.

What she wouldn't give for modern conveniences!

Now she understood why Darian didn't wear much.

* * *

Cold drops and the steady drizzle of rain in the trees and grass woke her in the middle of the night. Sara curled up at the back of her shelter, which wasn't waterproof at all. Water dribbled through the layers of leaves and fell coldly onto her shirt. She shivered and wished for a warm blanket, or even the company of Darian. Where had he gone? Why wasn't he under the shelter keeping dry with her, or as dry as one could be in a soaking tropical rain?

He didn't like her. Typical. She finally met a nice guy who respected her and he didn't like her the same way in return.

She curled up in misery and tried to stay dry and return to sleep.

The rain was relentless, though, and continued through the early morning hours. Still no Darian.

And she only had a couple fruits left from what he'd brought the day before. If he didn't show up soon, she'd go hungry.

Fear stopped her heart cold. Had something happened to him?

Please be all right. She prayed for an answer, but a gray morning arrived without any sign of Darian.

The rain continued its drizzle with intermittent periods of slowing, which gave her hopes of it quitting, only to wash those hopes away with its relentless downpour. She shivered from the wetness that seemed to soak through her. Staying dry wasn't an option.

Neither was going hungry, or enduring the loneliness. She had to find Darian, rain or shine.

She missed his company.

If only she had an umbrella.

The trouble was that, while she wasn't exactly dry under the shelter, she'd be soaked quickly in the rain.

At least it wasn't a cold rain, like back home, where even in the summer, the day could cool to the 50's with a cold summer rain. This was more like a refresher from the heat and humidity that clung to the air on the sunny days.

She missed home. Her parents must be worried sick about her being missing. Would she ever see them again, along with her sister? Her heart yearned to walk into the house and be overwhelmed by the scent of dinner cooking and her family chatting. The idea of never seeing them again filled her with loneliness. It all caught up. Now with Darian gone, it crashed upon her.

Her tears washed down her face like the rain on her shelter. She hated being alone. She hated that island. She hated the storm. She hated being hungry and worrying about her survival.

She hated hating everything.

Time to get up and look for Darian, if he was real.

She wiped her eyes of the tears and sniffed. "No more pity party." Resolving to find Darian, she stepped barefooted into the rain with a fruit in her hands to eat as she walked. After a quick drink from the spring, she headed to the beach.

"Darian!" She called through the trees for him, but the steady fall of heavy drops on the vegetation drowned all other sounds.

By the time she reached the sand, she was soaked. The air was tolerable, though, not cold like it would have been back in Wyoming in early spring. If she returned, she'd have quite the story to tell.

Positive thoughts. Yes, she would be rescued.

"Darian!"

Waves lapped up the beach, washing away any footprints he might have left. She walked along, looking out to sea for the possibility of a ship but also searching through the trees for the chance that he might be doing something there. Where did he hide?

Why did he hide?

"Darian!"

She longed to see him again. His kindness and shyness intrigued her. He could have been eccentric and brutish, but he wasn't. He acted civilized and considerate, far more than she could say for her ex.

"Darian!"

Behind her, her footprints in the wet sand left indentations down the beach, but she walked out of the line of waves. If he'd been there recently, she would see a sign.

She continued along the beach, searching for him and scanning the gray horizon for signs of passing ships.

At the trees where she had awakened on the island, she noticed a wide smudge in the sand, as if something had been dragged from the water. At the base of the tree was a pile of food.

Her stomach grumbled to hurry her feet, but caution about what could have left that wide groove put her on alert for danger.

"Darian?"

Had something big scared Darian away? Sharks couldn't crawl onto land, could they?

No. Ridiculous. Stop being paranoid. Still, her heart raced and her senses remained piqued.

The track disappeared where the waves washed it smooth. Now, she wished she had brought the dagger, instead of leaving it at the shelter. Is that why Darian had given it to her, for protection?

She gazed out at the waves and thought she saw something breaking the surface. The knob disappeared and a dolphin's tail briefly breached the water before vanishing beneath the waves. She hoped it was her dolphin friend.

Sara shuddered and hurried to gather up the fruit and cold fish and return to the shelter to retrieve the sharp blade. Never would she wander without it again.

Please be all right, she silently prayed.

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About the Author

Melanie Nilles (aka M. A. Nilles) grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm. Along with her interest in horses, she always had a fascination with science fiction and fantasy. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, and three cats. Her published works include the popular *STARFIRE ANGELS* series and the *LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON* epic. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse. For updates, visit her website at www.melanienilles.com.