

ILHA de QUEIMADA GRANDE; A.K.A. The ISLAND of the GOLDEN SNAKES

By: Caitlin Quinn

Part 2



“Papa, WHAT IS THAT?”

Janaina just gaped at her father, Paolo. He was struggling to sound casual. It wasn't working. Goosebumps whelped her arms and it wasn't from the weather. The sky above was brilliant blue, so blue and clear it hurt her eyes, even with her RayBans on. The waters surrounding the sailboat were not so inviting, the sea here was always rough and choppy. Her father had grown up in Sao Paulo, near the sea. He had always been drawn to the vastness of the ocean and had entered the Brazilian Navy at 18. Then, he'd made a fortune when he and his friend, Beto, found a 16th century shipwreck full of Spanish gold bullion. He'd invested his money wisely, and now, spent much of his time aboard his beloved sailboat. Janaina had been sailing before she could walk. If he was edgy, something was wrong, very wrong. “What is it, Papa?”

“I'll just go below deck and check the weather charts, see what's brewing. Be sure we're on course. Take the helm, keep her steered due south. We'll weather this storm. It's fine,” he whispered.

“Papa, how bad can the storm be? The sky is beautiful - it's just a brisk breeze. Right?” she squeaked.

“Ahh, my pet,” her father crooned, coming back to stand beside her, “it's alright. Take over, head for that island, here, take the binoculars, we'll just hold up there until the storm passes. It's probably nothing, but, over there, off port, see those clouds, storm farther out to sea. Don't fret.”

“I'm not worried, Papa. We've been through worse,” she whispered back. But, her father's taut muscles and ticking eyelid told her maybe they really hadn't. Maybe, even he hadn't. He kissed her cheek and disappeared into the interior.

Janaina tried to keep the wheel steady, but it was getting harder as each minute passed. The clear sky was turning an ominous gray, the breeze much cooler than it had been just thirty minutes earlier.

“Papa, Papa,” she called down. “It's getting a bit gusty up here. Papa, can you hear me? I'm having a bit of trouble holding her steady.”

“We'll be fine, Princesa,” he said, coming to stand beside her. “There's a cove on the other side of the island we're heading to. Nothing to worry about. But, just in case, remember, should we have to abandon ship, you are not to step one foot on that island. Stay in the raft, understand?” He smiled at her, but she noticed it didn't reach his eyes. The muscle above his left eye was twitching. She knew that sign, it wasn't good. She'd seen it far too many times – just before he'd left her mom.

“Aye, stay in the raft,” she repeated. Her father gripped the helm, turning the sailboat into the familiar zigzag pattern. She lost her balance when a wave caught them off guard. Regaining her sea legs, she looked towards the stern.

“Oh my God, Papa! Look!”

Behind them, just to the port side, the sky had filled with strange wispy, murky

brown clouds. A solid wall of rain completely blocked out the sun and the horizon. Lightning blasted the water, churning up huge waterspouts in front of the fast moving squall. She guessed it was less than a mile away.

“Get below! Grab the lifesaver vests. Get one on! NOW!” her father yelled.

She bolted down the ladder, raced to the hold area and jerked the lid off the lazarette that held their vests. The seas had grown rough, rocking the boat with nauseating results. She recalled her father calling this motion as being 'between wind and water' – or, the part of the hull that was normally underwater was now bobbing above the waterline then crashing back down. She snapped her vest on while scurrying up the ladder.

“Get down!” her father screamed, just before a wave crashed over the side. If she'd have been any further up the ladder, the wave would have caught her in the chest, slamming her against the hatchway, possibly breaking several of her ribs.

“Now?” she asked after the wave had passed over them.

“Hurry!” her father yelled back, “another one's coming.”

The ship yawed viciously, causing Janaina to slip on the wet deck. She found herself more sliding over to her father than running to him. She planted her feet the way her father had taught her, a wide stance; her feet pointed slightly outward. She grabbed the helm so her father could get into his lifejacket. The ship pitched as a huge wave hit the bow. Janaina couldn't hold the helm under the force of the water and when the next wave hit the port side, the vessel broached. She lost complete control of the vessel, and it heeled heavily as the gale force winds whipped the unstable sails.

Paolo grabbed the wildly spinning helm, trying to hold it leeward, his back and arm muscles straining against its pull. “Janaina, get yourself tied to the rail, it's going to get bad!”

She ran over to the starboard side of the boat but her father motioned her to the port side. “Get low! Stay low, under the rail!” he yelled. “And be sure to use a hitch knot. Pull it tight, tighter!”

Janaina's fingers ached from the strain of pulling so tight and the rope shredded her palms as she fought to strap herself to the railing. Her father couldn't tie himself down; he needed both hands on the wheel to keep the Iara facing into the waves. If he lost the battle, the ship would take the wave broadside, causing it to broach again. If it broached-to, the sailboat could capsize. Or worse, it could rollover. Not something Janaina wanted firsthand experience with.

In minutes, the surrounding sky was obscured. Tumultuous winds began churning the seas into riotous 40-70 foot waves that slapped and slammed the vessel around as easily as light breezes scattered

confetti at Mardi Gras. There had been no time to prepare, no time to batten down the hatches, no time to secure the mainsail for better stability. All they'd had time to do was for Janaina to tether herself to the rail and her father to grab the helm. Paolo had struggled to keep the vessel headed directly into the squall, but lost control when a huge wave ripped it from his grasp. Horizontal rain pelted them, stinging and blinding in its ferocity. The wind howled, screeching until she thought her ears would explode.

Thunder rumbled and roared, the sound so loud, it vibrated the air around her. Lightning bolts streaked, illuminating the black sky in eerie electrified tentacles.

The next wave caught them broadside on the port. The blast of water hit the boat high, forcing the vessel to heel. Boards creaked ominously, and then gave way under the weight of the crushing sea, ripping from the boat like a kite in a storm. The huge sails flapped and twisted in the gale force winds putting further strain on the vessel. The next wave, at least 50 feet by Janaina's guess, bore down on the vulnerable sailboat. The mast and sails collided with the ocean, snapping the mast in half.

“Hold on, Janaina, she's capsizing!” her father yelled.

Janaina felt the sailboat lose its grip with the sea. Her arms and legs flung forward – away from her torso, away from the vest that she had used to secure herself to the railing. She was flying through the air, watching the barely visible horizon disappear and the sea rush up to meet her. She felt a rib snap when the water slammed her back against the railing she was tied to. The saltwater invaded her nostrils, her mouth. The force of the rollover pounded her lungs, forcing the air from her. Pain gripped her and she knew her right eardrum had ruptured as the water crushed her. Janaina kept her eyes tightly closed, she didn't want to see the underwater world flash by her. That wasn't the way she'd wanted to remember this trip, inverted, strapped to the railing, struggling for air, all while watching sea creatures dart past her, panicking the same way she was. She held her breath for what seemed an eternity, though in reality, it had probably been only seconds. And, just as quickly as she'd been underwater, she was upright, the rain stinging her face.

Janaina wiped the saltwater from her eyes, searching for her father. Another wave crashed over the railing where she was still tied, bruising more of her ribs. Jetsam and other debris from broken planks and railing rode the crest of the wave, littering the deck as the water returned to the sea it rose from. The saltwater stung her eyes, or was it her own tears? She couldn't be sure. Whichever, it ran into her mouth, both salty and metallic. The metallic taste meant she was bleeding, she just didn't know from where. The squall lasted only a few more minutes. But, the aftermath was devastating. Their beloved sailboat was badly listing and taking on water. But, worse still...

“PAPA! PAPA! WHERE ARE YOU?”

Look for Part 3 next week!

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