

Part 4 ILHA de QUEIMADA GRANDE; A.K.A.

The ISLAND of the GOLDEN SNAKES

By: Caitlin Quinn



“Papa, is it really true you're only one step away from certain death? Does that mean, the other legend, about the lighthouse keeper and his family being attacked by the snakes in the middle of the night, is real? That the snakes slithered into the cottage, biting them over and over until they died? That the snakes consumed them, leaving only bones? Is it true that's why the navy forbids people on the island?”

“Don't worry about that, not now. We will be rescued,” he told her.

“But, Papa, is it true?”

“Legend. It's purely legend, probably dreamed up by the Brazilian Navy. The snakes are real, but the story... I do not believe,” he told her.

“Papa, did you know when you're less than truthful, your eyebrow twitches?” she asked.

“Janaina, you say such things!”

“Not me, Mama says so.”

It was getting dark, so dark, she could only make out his profile. It was unsettling, as much time as she'd spent onboard the sailboat, the thought of being shipwrecked had never crossed her mind. Now, drifting in black, jarring waters, she began to understand her mother's reluctance when her father mentioned sailing the islands off the Brazilian coast. Tennessee didn't seem so humdrum anymore, and the Brazilian coast had lost its exotic appeal.

“Stay awake, Princesa. I know you're tired, but we can't afford a sudden movement.” Her father retrieved the flashlight, clicked it on and off, signaling into the darkness. They both searched the distance, hoping for a reply.

Nothing.

The only sound she heard was the water slapping against the raft's rubber sides; the only light she could see was where a few stars penetrated the dense fog. The air was cold, damp, bone-chilling. She shivered, rocking the raft. Frigid seawater sloshed into the craft, freezing her bare feet. She hadn't even thought about grabbing shoes before they abandoned ship.

Janaina had never felt so alone in all her life. She didn't want to be a baby, really, she didn't. But... she was cold – and terrified. It didn't help, when the moon slipped from behind the clouds and illuminated their position – far too close to the island. Far too close to the slithering, scaly, heat-seeking, fanged flesh-dissolving demons.

She watched her Papa pull the oars from the hooks and drop them back into the turbulent water. His muscles strained as he pulled against the strong current, the raft lurching against the force of the waves with each stroke. Beads of perspiration formed on his brow and he took slow, deep breaths before each pull.

She sat silent, wanting to hear more of the story, not daring to ask him to continue, knowing that it was taking all her father's strength to row them farther out to sea. With each stroke, the raft lurched, sending a frigid spray of oceanwater into the float, onto them. Janaina could only dream of her bed, of being

safe and dry, hiding beneath the thick down-filled purple comforter in her bedroom back in Tennessee.

About fifteen minutes later, he had managed to get them closer to their sailboat, where they had a better chance of being rescued. Once he'd signaled with the flashlight again, and again gotten no response, he'd turned his attention back to her.

“Tell me, Janaina, what are you and your friends into these days? Are you dating?”

“Papa!”

“You are growing up so fast. I have to ask, Janaina.”

“No, but there's Miquel. He's so... he's so... Papa,” she blushed, how could she describe Miquel to her father? He was so... he was on the junior basketball team and he held her books, and sometimes, he held her hand when they walked down the hall. He'd even kissed her a couple of times. No, this conversation just wasn't going to happen. “Papa, tell me more about the lightkeeper legend.”

“Princesa, it will only upset you.”

“Papa, I want to know, please.”

“Look over my shoulder, due south, see in the distance, you might be able to see the outline of the lighthouse against the night sky. It was a beautiful place, the tall tower that held the light against the night sky. The cozy cottage was surrounded by the island's lush greenery. But, like all lighthouses, it was remote, far from the civilized world. It took a man of strong constitution to do that job.”

“What about his wife?” she interrupted. “She would have been, what was the word again?”

“Yes,” he continued, “he was married to a woman of strong constitution as well. This island has always been difficult to get to. Supplies would have been delivered by boat, but probably no more than once a month.”

“How romantic,” she whispered, gasping when she realized she'd whispered aloud.

“Romantic? Think, Princesa, they were totally isolated from the outside world except for a few hours once a month. No phone, only a radio, surrounded by pristine beauty, and always afraid one of them would be bitten. No, it wasn't a romantic life, Janaina, it was a harsh, brutal world.” He leaned over carefully, retrieved the flashlight and signaled out into the night. “Watch, Princesa, do you see a response?”

She shook her head no, disappointed. “But, Papa, they had only each other to depend on. How is that not romantic?”

“Ah, I see your point,” he smiled at her, but she noticed the smile did not cause his eyes to twinkle. “But, they were not alone, they had children.”

“Children! What happened to them? Please, Papa, I want to know.”

“The legend, Princesa. As you know,

the island is prone to sudden storms. The story says on a cold, moonless night, a tempest rolled in from the south, bringing with it torrential rains and hurricane strength gale winds. The protective glass surrounding the Fresnel lamp was smashed during the storm. The rain poured in, dampening the wick, extinguishing the flames. The lightkeeper and his wife were kept busy for two days and nights, maintaining the light. No matter the danger they were in, it was the lightkeeper's job to keep the lamp burning – to warn ships away from the rocky shores of the island.”

“But, if the winds were so strong, and the rains kept... I don't understand, Papa, how could they keep it lit?” She was suddenly chilled to the bone, and not from the temperature or the fact her feet were wet from the frigid water puddling in the raft's bottom.

“They would have carried kerosene and dry wicks up those stairs all night long and all day for two days. They would have been exhausted when the storm finally subsided. Since the legend says the family was killed while they slept, they would have been easy prey.”

“How awful, Papa. The children too?”

“It is said the storm ravaged the island, upending trees, tossing debris against their house. It would have upset the natural balance. The migratory birds the snakes prey on would have sensed the storm's approach and left the island. With so many snakes, and so few birds left for them to feed on, it wouldn't have taken long for the snakes to seek out another food source. I guess, it adds credence to the tale.”

“How awful,” she said, sitting in silence. Was that to be their fate as well?

“Time to signal; watch for a response.”

The fog was so dense she couldn't imagine the flashlight would be able to penetrate it. But, they had to try. They couldn't give up. Their only other option was to land on the island – and take their chances with the snakes. She shivered. No, that wasn't an option.

He signaled again, clicking the light on and off, on and off, shining it into the distance. He repeated the process, signaling northward, eastward and then towards the south, waiting two minutes between each repetition.

At first, Janaina thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. Had she really seen a response? Or was the light reflecting off the fog, bouncing back at them?

“Papa! Signal again! There, just to the East!”

Clicking it on and off, they waited, both holding their breath. After two minutes, he signaled again. Janaina was about to lose hope when a beam broke through the fog.

“Papa! Look! Do you see it?”

“Yes, I see it too, Princesa!”

There, just in the distance, a flashing light. Paolo continued to signal every two minutes. And, then, they would wait for the flashing to be returned. It was hard to judge through the fog just how far away the rescue ship was, but, they had been found. It could take a while, but, before the morning sun rose, Janaina knew she would be safe. And, in less than five days, her Papa would be flying with her back to Tennessee.

THE END ~ Look for a new story next week!
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