

## Outerbridge Sound

### Chapter 3 - Vince

**“Nicki Outerbridge enjoyed driving the military Humvee she’d managed to borrow from the Janssen Regiment. A long way from being new, though the vehicle had only one previous owner, the American armed forces.”**

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Dom Trecca didn’t mind science experts being on the team, he respected their expertise. Just so long as they gave their piece to camera and then stayed out of the way. Everyone knew the show wasn’t going to be about real science, because real science made viewers take a nap, or worse, swap channels.

SHP made TV programmes about science the way the public liked it, full of hints about sinister goings on and real-life terrors. The marine biologist Sam had called in from the Bahamas simply didn’t get that. Dr Bryan Hayman from the Bahamian Marine Institute was in the middle of making the lights on the water seem mundane and ordinary. TV was never, ever about the mundane and ordinary. “.....As I said, it’s a gas of some kind, caused by the decay of organic material in Outerbridge Sound. Marsh gas is known to ignite and create similar lights on the water. I’ll collect the gas and send it off for analysis, but I’ve no doubt the lab will confirm that it’s a natural flammable gas.”

All three of them were stood beside the dark still waters of the sound, which looked perfectly normal in the daylight.

“We’ve all seen the lights Bryan, there’s no odour, none at all.” Said Sam.

“Hardly surprising, the natural gas people cook with often has no odour. Often a smell is added to the gas so that people can tell if there’s a leak.” Said Bryan.

“Why now though, why has it suddenly bubbled up to the surface ?” Asked Dom.

“My first guess would be something geological. There are no dead volcanoes of course, only dormant ones. This entire group of islands are the remnants of a vast caldera. With the depth you measured for the sound.....Anything could be going on down there, stirring up the sediment.”

“Or any.....Thing.” Said Sam.

“Ahh, you mean the monster of the sound.” Said Bryan. “If asked whether it could be some huge beast or family of beasts stirring up the sediment....I’d have to say it is a possibility.”

“Will you say that on camera ?” Asked Dom.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s why you brought me here.”

“Thank you Bryan.” Said Sam. “An expert here with us on Janssen is a huge advantage. Can I tempt you to stay for a while ? I’d like you to speak to Paris Ferland when she gets here.”

“My institute could do with a little publicity, our patrons dig deeper into their pockets if we’re associated with something like this. And of course....Working with Paris wouldn’t be a chore. I didn’t know you’d signed her up.”

“It’s news to me too.” Said Dom. “I thought we were using Paula again.”

Dom was beyond being simply annoyed, though he was good at hiding it. He was looking forward to working with Paula, so was Ilaria. They knew Paula well, she’d already been the onscreen talent for six or seven previous shows. She knew how everyone worked and fitted in. Paris didn’t know any of them and she also had a reputation for being very high maintenance.

“We all love Paula Dom, but something as big as this show could be.....We will talk it over later, I promise.”

Paris Ferland had just left CNN after a very public and well publicised argument with her bosses. After flirting with joining Fox News, she'd been guest presenter of a low budget game show on NBC. Even that had been reported by the press everywhere and the show's ratings had mushroomed. Yes, Dom could see why Sam wanted Paris to replace Paula, even if it meant them trying to break in a new presenter as they made the show.

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Denise Scott had never quite got over the wanderlust associated with making TV in faraway locations, along the path less travelled. London was rainy, of course it was. Seeing all the Tweets about the monster of Outerbridge Sound, with all those swaying palms. On a grey London day, it was pure torture.

“A cruel and unusual punishment.” She mumbled.

The announcement on the depth of the sound had gone viral, after a lot of help from Dimitri and his army of trolls for hire. Or angels for hire if they were on your side. Need an election rival torn apart by rumours ? Dimitri was the go to guy. If you needed a location for a monster show boosted up to and past the level normally associated with pop stars and supermodels ? Dimitri could arrange that too, for a price. It seemed there were whole basements full of people sat in front of computers in Lagos, just waiting to click on like, vote for and retweet. A few pennies per click was all it cost, though a successful campaign required a lot of clicks, a hell of a lot of clicks. The finance people in London had loved it of course and the promises of funding were in place. It was why SHP could afford the colossal fee Paris Ferland had demanded.

“Alright, time to call Florence.” She muttered.

Having an MP as a friend was something Denise had intended to use sparingly. There had been parties where they'd ended up drunk and telling each other how much they loved one another. The usual stuff, some of it accompanied by pics that could definitely never be posted to social media. Did Florence only take her calls because she had something on her ? Denise hoped not, though she realised it was a possibility.

“Hi....Is it a good time ?”

“It's always a good time, give me a moment.”

There was the sound of muttering as her friend obviously asked someone to leave her office.

Florence Karádi MP had been her friend right through university, friends and a little bit more than friends for a while. Florence claimed her family had anglicised their name. If that was true, Denise dreaded to think what it had been before. Or maybe Florence was the English equivalent of something with eight vowels and twelve consonants.

“Right, I'm back..... How are you Den ? Still making those Big Foot films ?”

“I think Big Foot is one of the few weird creatures we've never featured.”

“I saw your tweets.....My sister's kids are already looking forward to the TV programme. What channel will it be on ?”

“We're still negotiating with a few major networks.”

Florence had been a bit to the right at college, though there was no sign she'd intended to go into politics. When she'd become an MP for the current fairly authoritarian gang in power, a lot of people had been shocked. To Denise she'd still be Flo though, the girl who'd taught her the pleasure of being with another woman.

“We must meet up, perhaps over coffee ? I’d love to spend time talking over old times right now, but there’s a meeting...Isn’t there always a meeting. And I suspect you had a reason for your call.”  
“I feel bad asking, but.....We’re having a few problems with the local government people in Janssen. They were nice and cooperative; nothing was too much trouble. One of our contacts out there has managed to borrow two military vehicles for us to use, but we don’t want to go everywhere looking like the army has arrived. We did put in paperwork for permission to bring in two SUVs, but the locals are now far less cooperative.”

“Ahh, yes.....That’ll be because of the Royal Navy I’m afraid and the promised visit.” Said Flo.

“I haven’t seen anything in the news about that.”

“You wouldn’t, the UK media obviously thought it wasn’t worth reporting. There was something in the Bermuda Royal Gazette of all places, small island communities support one another I guess. Anyway, a Frigate was supposed to arrive in Janssen for a goodwill visit. Unfortunately for technical reasons the Frigate never arrived and Britain isn’t that popular with the Donder Isles government.”

“This is causing us real problems Flo. Is there anyone you could butter up, or lean on a little ?”

Denise heard Flo sigh and knew that one day a bit of sexual curiosity at university would stop buying her favours with her old friend.

“Once I could have leaked a news item that we were sorry and about to send the frigate. That would have solved the problem and to be honest, neither side would have cared if the Royal Navy had never shown up. Sadly, we now have a new man in charge at the MOD who’s afflicted with honesty. I will whisper in his ear, but for now at least. You’ll need to use those military vehicles.”

There was something about hearing Flo’s voice again, something inside her wanted to see her old friend again. It was a little self-interest; an MP was a useful contact to have. There was more to it though and as the saying goes, it was complicated.

“I do understand Flo, you’re not a miracle worker.”

“Well, maybe on a really good day.”

“Let’s set a date for that coffee.”

“How about Wednesday after work ? Say about seven....You know where.”

“Great, see you Wednesday.”

After the call Denise leant back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling. She had a call to make to Sam and he wasn’t going to enjoy hearing about the missing Frigate and probably not getting the two SUVs. She also noticed that the cleaners had missed yet another cobweb above the door.

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Nicki Outerbridge enjoyed driving the military Humvee she’d managed to borrow from the Janssen Regiment. A long way from being new, though the vehicle had only one previous owner, the American armed forces. Aside from a couple of fuel tankers, she was probably driving a vehicle with the largest engine on the island. Her Jeep tended to bounce over bits of rough road, but the Humvee flattened them like a steamroller.

“Oh, I love this beast of a car.” She said.

“I get to drive it later, you promised.” Said Ilaria.

Just the two of them going to interview Vince on film, they’d probably get an actor to read his words for the final broadcast version. Nicki knew Vince and the way he trusted her, but he tended to be awkward around anyone aggressive. She wasn’t sure how he’d react to Ilaria, though she knew Sam on a bad day, would have him clamming up and hiding in the bathroom.

“We need to take it slow with Vince.” Said Nicki. “Nothing he might think of as being demanding.”

“Hey, I can talk to weird guys....I have two brothers.”

Ilaria ended by laughing, loudly. Nicki began to wonder if it might have been better to bring Sam.

“So have I.” Said Nicki. “Have two brothers I mean.”

“What are they like ?”

“They’re both bastards.....You’re bound to meet them if you’re here for a while, it’s a small island.”

“Oh, come on Nicki, give me a few details.” Said Ilaria. “Are they good looking ? I do have a thing about mean and moody, just so long as they’re pleasing to the eye.”

“I’d hardly call Dom mean and moody.”

“Hey, how did you.....Anyway, about your brothers.”

“J, short for Jerome, is about forty and married with a couple of rug rats. Quite good looking and being married doesn’t seem to have slowed him down much.”

“Jerome huh, I love old fashioned names. What about your other brother ?” Asked Ilaria.

“You’d like Thomas, he’s thirty seven and very good looking. He did sleep with a woman once, in the belief that you should try everything at least once. He told me the experience was ‘interesting.’ Let’s just say you’re definitely not his usually type.”

“Such a waste when the pretty ones sleep with each other.....Try everything once apart from folk dancing and incest.” Said Ilaria.

“What ?”

“Just a saying Nicki, I have no idea who originally said it.”

Vince lived with his family at the far north of Jannsen, close to what everyone called the Old Dockyard. Actually, it was the only dockyard, the one where the container ships arrived that kept the islanders fed and supplied. His father worked at the docks, as did his oldest sister. Nicki was hoping that just Vince’s mother would be home, he talked best in front of a small audience.

“Here we are, the last building on the left.” Said Nicki.

She parked the huge Humvee half on the road and half on the crab grass verge. There was already some movement of the curtains as someone looked to see who’d arrived in such a beast of a vehicle. At least having Jannsen Regiment written on the side showed they were locals.

“A very pretty house.” Said Ilaria.

Vince’s mother opened the door before they arrived. A woman with a smile on her face, though she’d needed quite a bit of persuading to agree to Vince doing a recorded interview. In the end the five hundred American dollars probably clinched the deal, the family weren’t exactly awash with money.

“Good morning June. How is Vince today ?” Asked Nicki.

“Looking forward to seeing you, which is a good sign. He’s out the back, it’s cooler out there.”

Citrus trees were in every backyard, with piles of windfall fruit a far from unusual sight. Even the poorest families could grow enough fruit to provide a meal waiting to be picked off the trees in their yard. It seemed Vince’s family preferred grapefruits and he was sat at a table placed so that a fully grown grapefruit tree gave it shade in the mornings.

“Hello Nicki.”

“I brought Ilaria with me is that alright ? She’s going to set up the TV camera.”

“That’s fine.”

“If I want to ask you a few questions, would that be alright ?” Asked Ilaria.

Vince had a few problems since the accident, but he was male and Ilaria had a winning smile. Nicki wasn’t surprised when he nodded his agreement. With the breeze and the sound of birds, it wasn’t the ideal place to record, but there was little chance of any of it being used in the show. Raw

material was all it was, to be read by an actor who'd look far more authentic than Vince. June was hovering a little, though Nicki knew her and doubted if she'd be a problem.

"So, I want to ask you about the day the glass bottom boat got chewed up." Said Nicki.

"Don't upset my boy." Said June.

"We won't, I promise."

"I saw the thing in the water, though what Charlie Dunkley told you isn't.....He got a few things wrong. Please don't tell him I said that, he might sack me."

"We won't tell him." Said Ilaria.

Though with luck several million people would watch an actor speaking the boy's words on the show. The show had to be getting into her own moral compass, she didn't correct Ilaria.

"I saw the grey thing under the boat, like a huge eel or something." Said Vince. "It had claws all along it that it was using to try and rip open the glass bottom. If it hadn't been for the Major we might all have died. Charlie didn't get The Dolphin out of the sound, it was the Major. Charlie lost it, he was weeping at one point, crying like a baby."

"Who's the Major?" Asked Nicki.

She knew just about everyone of the island who used a military rank in their name, genuine or made up. The only Major she could think of was in his eighties and unlikely to go on tourist trips to the sound.

"A huge man, a Texan and damned proud of it." Said Vince. "He kept telling me how big Texas was compared to Janssen. His wife was a tiny lady with dark hair. She was nice too. If it hadn't been for the Major....."

"Is this Major on any of your cruise ship passenger lists?" She asked Ilaria.

"No, we'll obviously need to make a few more calls, or rather someone in London will."

"The Major will tell you, he saw the eyes too." Said Vince.

"What eyes?" Asked Nicki.

"Don't make things up Vince." Said June. "You never told me about any eyes."

"I don't lie mum; I saw them under the water. Just like I saw them when the tourist was taken."

Nicki looked at Ilaria who was grinning like a Cheshire cat. They both knew that Vince had just told them about something huge, if it was true. There were tourists killed on Janssen, though mercifully it was rare. The most common cause was trying to drive a hired bike on the right, when the population of Janssen drove on the left. More signs were needed, but signs cost money. Sometimes a tourist driving on the right would meet a delivery truck coming the other way. A tiny number were killed by something in the ocean, usually by prodding something that didn't appreciate being prodded. Missing tourists though.....That was just about unknown.

"Tell us about the tourist Vince?"

"He's just making it up." Said June. "Stop it boy, you'll get into all sorts of trouble."

Only Vince wasn't lying and June knew that, she was certain of it. She seen it before, no one on Janssen wanted trouble from the outside world and a missing tourist meant huge amounts of trouble.

"Talk to us Vince." Said Ilaria. "We can deal with the authorities if it's needed."

Another half truth Nicki decided she could live with. For whatever reason Vince had kept quiet about seeing an attack, perhaps even a death. He deserved a little grief over that and it wouldn't just be the local police investigating the crime. The home country police force of the tourist would insist on being involved.

"I'm not sure when it happened, but it was on a weekend when Liverpool lost a match." Said Vince.

Everyone on Jannsen was addicted to British football, or almost everyone. Nicki hated the game, but had to admit that as an addiction, it probably did less harm than cocaine or opioids.

"That doesn't narrow it down much Vince, they've had a bad year." Said Ilaria. "Do you remember who beat Liverpool."

"No."

"Tell us what you saw." Said Nicki.

She could tell Vince wanted to please them, but something left him looking forlorn and unable to get his words out. It seemed to take him an age to mutter about getting someone called Clyde into trouble.

"You mean Clyde, the oldest of the Simmon's boys?" Asked Nicki. "How would telling us about the tourist get him in trouble?"

"Oh, I know." Said June. "They're not worried about you borrowing Clyde's bike once in a while. Talk to them boy, it's better than explaining it to the police."

Nicki was worried about Vince riding a bike, though that argument could wait for another day. There were no courts to take away driving licenses on Jannsen, few had licenses anyway. The police had told Vince not to ride a bike after the accident and that should have been enough.

"Clyde was drunk, we'd all had a few beers." Said Vince. "I only had two bottles, but Clyde had trouble standing up."

"Where was this?" Asked Ilaria.

"The field behind Rum Runners. We still go there and kick a ball about and drink a few beers. Sometimes girls come there too."

"I know it well Vince, I've spent a few evenings drinking there." Said Nicki. "A few years ago now of course. I'm assuming you did Clyde a favour by offering to take his bike home?"

"That's it, that's exactly what happened. I was on his Honda, heading along the coast road where it bends around the back of the sound. I saw a tourist going the same way I was going, but he was on the wrong side of the road. I flashed my light, but he just started shouting at me. I think he might have been drunk."

"Yeah, there's a lot of that. So, what happened next?" Asked Nicki.

"I flashed my lights again and got close enough to shout 'on the left' at him. Lights came from the other way and he must have realised. He wobbled about and went off the road and into someone's orchard."

"Lots of questions Vince." Said Ilaria. "What time was it, roughly?"

"Not sure, dark though, really dark."

"Do you know who the orchard belonged to?"

"No."

"Did you ever see the approaching vehicle?"

"No, I'd gone looking for the tourist."

"Alright, tell us what you did next." Said Nicki.

"I carefully followed him, right from where he'd left the road. The Honda was good over rough ground, until I saw the ditch. He must have hit the side of the ditch, before colliding with a banana palm. The palm was wrecked and his bike hadn't done too well either. I put the Honda on its stand and left the headlight on. I was on my way to see if the guy was alright. Then the thing came out of the trees."

Vince looked as though he might clam up on them, so Nicki leant forward and held his hand.

"Tell us about the thing in the trees Vince?"

"I had the Honda on dipped beam, aimed at the tourist. The grey looking thing just appeared and grabbed the guy. It grabbed him, though not with arms.....It had something else. It looked at me before going back into the trees and those eyes....."

"What was wrong with its eyes?" Asked Ilaria.

"They were yellow, bright yellow.....So yellow they seemed to glow in the bike's headlight. The centres of its eyes were red, dark red."

"You never told me any of this." Said June.

"Sorry mum, I didn't tell anyone. I wasn't supposed to be on a bike and didn't want to get into trouble. I'm surprised Darryl didn't get the police involved."

"Darryl....Who is Darryl?" Asked Ilaria.

"Darryl's Bike Hire, his place is just over the road from Rum Runners. His name was on the rear plate and there were stickers all over the bike the tourist was riding. I'd recognise one of Darryl's bikes anywhere. He had to know if a tourist bike went missing."

"Maybe not, one or two hire bikes get fished out of the ocean every year." Said Nicki. "People just get on the cruise ship and leave the hire bikes anywhere, even if it means losing their fifty dollar deposit."

"We should see Darryl though." Said Ilaria.

"Oh yes, we should definitely go and see Darryl."

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Jeffrey Gravenor had worked on scripts for everything from daytime soaps to being part of a writers' room for TV shows that had to put out twenty two decent episodes a season. He hated writers' rooms, but he loved working in places like Janssen. A man in a Janssen Regiment uniform was driving him to see one of the local 'witnesses,' in their other borrowed Humvee, a full spec military Humvee. To Jeffrey that was a new experience and like all writers, new experiences were a mine of future plot ideas.

"Wow, driving in this.....I keep wondering if the Taliban will come hurtling out of the bushes." He said.

"Did you serve in the British Army?" Asked Mark.

He'd been introduced to Mark Coulier and had a bit of an intro to the Janssen Regiment. From Nicki of course, she seemed to be a walking encyclopaedia on The Donder Isles. The regiment as everyone called it, was official. Not a weird group who'd formed a local militia, they were recognised and trained by the MOD in London. The weird thing was that just about everyone who served in the regiment was an unpaid volunteer. It had become a tradition in some families to join the regiment for two years, straight out of college. Mark looked to be about twenty two.

"No, though I once wrote a script for a TV drama set in Afghanistan."

"Why didn't you serve?" Asked Mark. "Nearly everyone serves here. Are you a pacifist?"

Mark was big, the sort of big you don't want to upset. He had this thing though, a way of emoting condescension out of his eyes. Actually, it was a mixture of condescension and disgust. Jeff turned to his old favourite to diffuse such situations, inappropriate humour.

"Not a pacifist Mark, I just don't fancy dying in a hail of bullets."

Again the look, as though he'd offended against some sort of warriors' code. Locals could be a little myopic, he knew that. An old guy in Tallinn had once asked him to deliver a note to an old friend who lived in Marshal Street in London. He'd had no idea of the sheer size of London, or the number of Marshal Streets. That old man had given him a look quite like the one Mark was giving him, when he'd refused to deliver the note.

"It's all recorded isn't it?" Asked Mark. "Why do they need a scriptwriter?"

Tempting to tell the guy to mind his own business, but Mark was built like the proverbial brick outhouse. Plus for all he knew, the guy's father might be a financial backer. Jeff was a firm believer in humble politeness wherever possible. He even had 'Be Kind' on his Twitter intro. The strange thing was that despite that, he knew he had the reputation among other writers, for being a pain in the arse.

"The public really aren't that good at recalling facts. I help them sound even more authentic and real than they would themselves. Get an actor to read the script on screen and you end up with something a hundred times better than a recording of the eye witness."

"Really?"

"Yes, really Mark, everyone does it. A few years ago there was a move towards authenticity, with real people on TV, talking about their experiences. It turned out the public didn't enjoy someone muttering or saying their piece while crying. No one wants authentic when it's ten minutes of someone upset and talking gibberish. So, the writers were brought back. Plus I can listen to things like local dialects and write them into the script. For instance there's a tendency on Janssen to replace some e sounds with a sounds, so references becomes raferences."

"Are you making fun of the way we talk?" Shouted Mark.

It wasn't that his life suddenly passed in front of his eyes, though Jeff was glad he had health cover guaranteed to fly him to somewhere with a decent hospital. It isn't easy to lean across the seats in a Humvee, but Mark was big enough to do it. The vehicle wobbled a bit, as the huge soldier held the wheel in one huge hand. No fist in the face though.....But a slap on the back.

"I got you didn't I Jeff? Can I call you Jeff?"

"You can call me anything you like."

Mark laughed a big friendly laugh, as he put both hands back on the wheel.

"You're a good guy Jeff, I'd have told me to fuck off about three miles back. We're going to have fun, I can tell."

"Crap Mark, yes you got me. Are you even a proper soldier?"

"Hey, I'll have you know my dad served in the regiment, as did his father and his father....It's a bit of a local tradition. Officially we're the first defence if anyone invades Janssen, or there're a riot or something. In reality the biggest thing we do is make sure everyone behaves themselves at the annual Miss Janssen beauty pageant. Some guys can try to get a bit over friendly after a few beers. Come to think of it, some of the girls can get a bit over frisky too."

They were going to see Charlie Dunkley, the once proud owner of The Dolphin, the only glass bottomed boat in The Donder Isles. If the insurance paid out, he was likely to be giving tours again before the end of the summer. Nicki had warned him Charlie lived in the back of beyond. Not that anywhere was that far away on such a small island.

"Here we are.....The Dunkley residence." Said Mark.

Charlie had given Nicki the idea that times had been hard recently, yet he lived in a large villa. Brockham House said the sign at the end of the drive, right next to a sign about not leaving rubbish on the roadway after seven on collection days. You could see the house from the road and even catch a glint from the pool.

"Charlie lives well." Said Jeff.

"Everyone on Janssen always claims to have had a bad year." Said Mark. "Charlie needs the insurance company to pay up, but he won't starve if they don't. You were right by the way; we do



have a tendency to put a in places that should be an e. We even have micro-dialects, where people in one street talk slightly differently to everyone else. Nicki is the expert if you're interested."

"I am, I'll talk to her. It might even make a good item for the show."

"Clever lady is our Nicki. Did you know she dated my dad once?"

"Really?"

"Hey, sorry for teasing you earlier. Imagine I have a flag to wave when I tell the truth and I'm busy waving it. About ten years ago Nicki and my dad had a bit of a thing. Of course, that really pissed off my mum."

"Are you still waving that flag Mark?"

"I am.....If we can get away from Charlie nice and early, I'll take you for a few beers and fill in the gaps in your knowledge of local gossip."

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Ilaria could understand Sam's reasoning that the military vehicles weren't always a blessing. Nice and comfortable and yes, they did tend to demand respect. The problem was that they had a distinctive sound and look, which meant they might as well send up a flare to tell everyone where they were.

"We have a missing tourist no one seems to have flagged up as missing."

Sam had told them all over dinner back at the villa.

"I think the local authorities like the idea of a TV programme about a mythical monster, but not the bad publicity that might arise if the beast of the sound turns out to be real. Think of it as if you opened your morning paper to see that the Loch Ness Monster had just eaten a boat full of holidaymakers."

"I dream of script ideas like that." Jeff had said.

A local government hiding dead tourists seemed a bit farfetched, but Ilaria loved any excuse to hurtle along the island's back roads on her bike. She had Dom on the back, who now seemed far more trusting in her bike riding skills. Nicki had a bike too, just about everyone who lived on the island owned a bike that had been tuned to get every fraction of a horsepower out of a 125cc engine. Nicki had Sam on the back of her bike, simply because he's insisted on coming.

"I'll hold the fort and call the cops if you haven't returned by dawn." Jeff has said.

Night brought its own problems when searching for something when you're not sure what you're looking for. It also brought privacy from any prying eyes that might be watching them during the daylight hours. Plus Ilaria had to admit, there was a bit of a rush in looking for monsters by flashlight. Nick was in front and waving her arm, before pointing towards some trees. It appeared they were there.

"I think this is the place." She told Dom.

"Crazy coming at night."

"It'll be fun."

Darryl, the owner of Darryl's Bike Hire, always paid a finder's fee for abandoned bikes. The bike in the orchard had been damaged, but not a write off. Fully repaired and thoroughly cleaned, it wasn't going to give them any clues. Luckily Darryl had a good memory and gave them an exact location for where he'd recovered his tourist bike. Ilaria followed Nicki as she left the road and entered the orchard. Citrus fruit trees mainly, they grew well in the climate. There were also a few banana palms, one of which seemed to have been through some bad times. Nicki was waving at the banana palm as she put her bike on its stand.

"Wow, he must have hit that at some speed." Said Dom.

“Not necessarily, they’re softer than they look.”

“How do you know?”

“I hit one on a bike when I was on a location search in Belize. Me, a bottle of Jack and a bike I wasn’t used to. I got a few bruises, but the palm was a write off.”

They left their crash helmets on the bike and joined Nicki, who was showing the wrecked palm to Sam.

“A tree is a tree to Vince.” She said. “This is where our tourist ran out of road and into a banana palm. Look..... There’s the ditch Vince mentioned.”

They ran their flashlights over the ground, but there wasn’t anything much to see. A climate where just about anything pushed into the ground would grow, corroded metal and buried plastics under dead leaves. It was Nicki, whose foot dislodged something in the leaf litter.

“Here....Crap, this is an expensive camera.” Said Nicki.

“A Nikon digital SLR, no one leaves one of those anywhere without coming back for it.” Said Sam.

There had been a bit of a party atmosphere, but that all changed with the finding of the camera.

With flashlights and moving the bikes to get their headlights on the right spot, it was like searching under floodlights. Ilaria found the hotel key card for a hotel in Miami.

“Looks like our cruise ship tourist was an American.” She said.

“About eighty percent of tourists to Janssen come from the USA.” Said Nicki.

“So far we’ve just found the things our tourist might have lost in the accident. He might well have gone back to the cruise ship and had the medical staff treat him.”

“Sadly, medical treatment on Janssen is rather infamous, and expensive.” Said Nicki.

“It might have been a she, not a he, Vince seems a bit unreliable.” Said Dom.

“Spread out a bit, we’ll have a last good look about.” Said Sam. “If we find nothing else, I’ll report the camera and the hotel card to the authorities. Someone might have reported them lost or stolen.”

Ilaria had reached the point, at about four in the morning, where she wanted to go back to the villa.

They seemed to have been digging through orchard debris for hours. She was filthy and the cute cricket noises the tiny frogs made had gone from being cute to downright irritating.

“Can we quit now?” She asked. “I want a hot shower and a few hours sleep.”

“Yeah, it’s about my bed time.” Said Nicki.

Later Dom denied screaming, though it had definitely sounded like a scream at the time. He had a good reason to scream though, she’d let out a yell when a toad had crawled across her foot in the dark.

“Fuck !” Yelled Dom.

Everyone clustered around Dom to look at the trainer he’d found in a pile of windfall fruit. A New Balance trainer, the right one, there was a nice large N on the side. A grubby trainer, though it looked better than most of the trainers to be seen on a busy night in Rum Runners.

“Oh, Christ !” Said Nicki.

“Scream if you want Dom, that is a definite ‘Oh Fuck,’ kind of find.” Said Ilaria.

“I didn’t scream.”

“Someone take a few pictures on a phone, the police will want to know about where we found.....That.” Said Sam.

“I brought my camera; it goes everywhere I go.” Said Ilaria.

She took over a hundred pictures, for them and she’d copy the SD card for the local cops. Maybe seeing so many weird things over the years had hardened her, but the object inside the trainer didn’t horrify her. Sticking up out of the trainer was a bone, which was still attached to a foot inside

the trainer. The local insect life had removed all the flesh from the bone, leaving a white stump of bone about four inches long.

"I think the tourist was a woman, the trainer looks a small size for a guy." She said.

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