



THE
LAMPLIGHTERS

FRAZER LEE

Dedication

To Laura, who lights the lamps so I may always find my way home.

Acknowledgements:

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Chapter One

“It’s the greatest job in the world.”

Vera smiled as she said the words.

“All I have to do is turn on the damn lights, water the plants; a few chores...”

Static crackled in her ear—the phone line was lousy tonight.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes,” came the reply, “but I can hardly hear you. There’s a weird kind of...echo.”

“It’s Jessie’s uplink,” Vera chuckled. “We’re not really allowed to call anyone from the island...”

“Sorry...how...calling me?”

Christ, the line was getting choppy. Vera pressed the cordless handset closer to her ear, then checked herself.

“As if that’ll make any difference,” she said. Probably talking to herself now.

The crackling grew louder. She could still hear her friend’s voice, buried beneath layers of digital cacophony. A faint echo smothered by an avalanche of noise.

There was something else in the mix too, an ominous growling hum like the electricity pylons near her home. Berlin, so far away now. Even as she thought it, the hum grew, drowning out what little was left of her friend’s staccato tones.

And with a click, silence.

“*Scheiße*,” she cursed, stabbing the redial button. The phone was completely dead. Hacking an outside line was a fine art, she appreciated that, but Jessie clearly needed some new software. And she’d be giving that little bag of smoke back too.

First things first. Vera put the handset in its cradle and headed for the kitchen. She walked over to the huge range in the centre of the room and ignited all four of the gas taps. Then, crouching on her haunches, she turned the oven on full blast. The expensive smoked glass oven door afforded her a look at her own reflection. Only a month on Meditrine Island and already she looked five years younger. Amazing. Gone were the dark gray shadows around her eyes—even her signature brittle dry hair had a new luster. Berlin could take care of itself, thanks very much. The island really was like a fountain of youth, she thought as she rose and crossed to the patio door.

Unclipping the latch, Vera had to use two hands to slide the glass behemoth open. Whoever owned this house had a serious heavy glass fetish. Stepping out into the night, her senses were flooded. The island’s fresh air was like no other, an intoxicating blend of jasmine and ocean spray. When she went back to the city, she’d have to remember to bottle and sell it.

Click.

Her quiet moment was suddenly blasted with fifteen hundred watts of raw security lighting as she stepped in front of the infrared sensors. She cursed the light for blinding her as she picked up the watering can, blinking away the white-hot glare. The light had brought the mosquitoes a-calling to her. They whizzed around her as she dashed back into the kitchen.

Vera filled the watering can with cool, clear water at the bath-sized sink. This was the least tedious of her tasks—the plants were going to drink their fill tonight. Amidst such fabulous wealth, such meticulous order, it felt good that a mere backpacker could decide the fate of items so precious to their millionaire owners.

Millionaires? Billionaires, more likely.

She remembered Jessie’s sardonic voice from the first time they’d hung out together, gossiping about who owned these mansions, this island. But Vera didn’t really care who the owners were. That they were paying her handsomely to do a few chores was all she cared about. And the most strenuous

chore was watering the plants. Easy money. “The job's a doozy,” Jessie had giggled. “Doozy Jessie had been working on the island longer than Vera and seemed to be going a little stir crazy...”

As the water rose closer to the brim of the watering can, the security lights clicked off suddenly. *Like everything else on the island they ran to a tight schedule,* thought Vera. As she did so milliseconds before the light bulbs faded, Vera saw something outside.

A figure.

She blinked twice, slow and firm. The ghost imprint of the blinding bulbs still there, forming crescent-shaped black holes in her mind's eye. Was there someone out there?

Vera blinked again, then swore furiously as liquid spilled onto her feet. Soaked, she closed the faucet and let the watering can rest in the sink unit. *Shouldn't have smoked that joint before coming up to the house,* she thought, sounding for all the world like her mother. Scatterbrain, she used to call Vera whenever she lost the power to function normally, everyday tasks becoming impossibly hilarious missions. She still wondered if her mother had known her daughter was stoned, or if she simply believed her child was missing a neuron or two million.

The old clumsiness was really kicking in now, as she left little pools of water on the tiled floor on her way to the patio. Putting the can down (yet more spills), she grabbed the door handle and pulled with all her might.

Swoosh.

The glass giant slid open easier this time. Vera bent down to pick up the can—then the smell hit her.

Something had invaded the envelope of jasmine and surf, corrupting the very night air with its presence. A hospital smell, harsh and synthetic, like the way her dentist smelled. She'd hated the dentist since she was a kid. Had he followed her here, to paradise, tracking her down after all the years to do all that work she had chickened out of? To tut and frown disapprovingly through his paper mask, noting her cannabis-stained enamel and ugly overbite?

She leaned out into the night air, her nostrils searching for the source of the stifling smell. It was mixed with something else now, like ripe leather.

Click.

He was standing right next to her, impossibly close. Vera's heart blasted into her mouth, choking her scream. The source of the smell regarded her idly, his black eyes like camera lenses. Cold. Unforgiving.

Before she could react, Vera heard a swooshing sound. The smell of rubber gloves perversely filled her nostrils, pushing all the way back into her throat as if someone really had jammed two fingers up her nose. The intruder's dark form was a monolith, burned into her eyes by the security lights.

Click.

Swoosh.

The bulbs faded once more. Vera's senses imploded as the sliding door crushed her skull against the alloy doorframe.

Crunch.

Swoosh, as the door slid back again.

Crunch.

Vera's body jerked uselessly then fell still; her brains spattered across the cool, thick glass.

Chapter Two

“It’s the greatest job in the world.”

Marla Neuborn tried to look interested, although in truth all she wanted to do was read her book. That’s why she’d come to the park, a bit of peace and quiet.

“Looking after these two. Aren’t they just adorable?”

The girl who’d sat down right next to her on the bench clearly wasn’t going to let up. She wanted proper conversation, goddammit. Marla couldn’t remember the last time she’d had one of those.

“Do you like kids?”

Marla closed her battered paperback with an audible sigh and looked up at the girl next to her. Pretty face, blonde hair—Marla suddenly felt a hundred times scruffier. Great, her mood had worsened. The girl sounded Swedish and just a little bit vacuous. If nothing else, at least Marla had the intellectual high ground.

“Yeah, I love them,” she lied.

This appeared to delight the girl; a slightly insane-looking smile spread across her face as she looked down at the pram in front of her.

“You should be an au pair. I get to look after these two all day. They’re as good as gold. And their parents are lovely...”

Marla had been an au pair, once. She shuddered as she remembered the tabloid headlines, “JUNKY AU PAIR A MENACE TO TODDLERS—MOTHER’S ANGUISH OVER INCIDENT”.

Highgate Park had been busy on the day of the “INCIDENT”, swarming with au pairs like her leaning on the handles of high-tech executive baby buggies, texting.

Marla had quickly maneuvered the kids to the playground area, as she always did. As she sat on the bench watching them attempting self-destruction on the swings, Marla had rolled a joint—as she always did. Kicking back and resting her head against the comforting hardness of the wooden bench, Marla had drifted off for a while enjoying the gentle birdsong and distant murmur of a jet plane.

Suddenly, a wailing scream broke into her reverie. Returning to her senses sluggishly, Marla peered through slightly red eyes to see what was up.

The children were screaming.

Marla ran. She ran and pushed through the little gate into the play area. An elderly woman was cooing over the children, trying to calm them down. The youngest was in a bad way, the broken bone protruding through her soft baby skin. Her face was a rictus of pain. A constant rising and dipping wail flooded from her agonized mouth like an air raid siren.

Sirens.

The ambulance had arrived soon afterwards, and the police car. Angry parents had pressed charges, of course, and she’d been unemployed ever since. So here she was, out of work and money in London. The most expensive city in the world.

Christ, she had to get of here. The Swede had started speaking into the pram in sickening baby talk. Marla stormed off and started the long walk home, the only place she’d get any peace now.

Marla let herself into her bed-sit, cursing the stiff lock as it nearly ate her key. She could barely wait to lock herself in her dark little room and smoke herself to sleep.

But sleep would not come. Her stomach was howling for food, so Marla dragged herself off the bed and rooted through the grimy cupboards in search of sustenance. A can of tuna, a little past its sell-by date, and a couple of rice crackers would have to do. She had nothing else. Eating from the can (*more unladylike*) she surveyed her room with mild despair.

Apart from the bed, a few charity shop paperbacks and dirty clothes scattered on the floor, the only sign that anyone was living there was a clunky old laptop. She'd inherited the machine from Carlo, an old boyfriend of hers. Poor Carlo fancied himself as a bit of a web entrepreneur but had left town in a hurry when immigration came calling. Marla decided to hold onto his computer for him, back payment for listening to all his crappy jokes and even crappier chat-up lines.

The damn thing barely worked at the best of times, but at least she could check her emails and look at job ads. The landlady let her use the phone line for free, as long as she stuck to the free dial-up service. Although "service" was stretching it a bit.

The modem crackled into life, sounding like the anguished wails of that injured child, and promptly crashed. A few more attempts and Marla was online.

"You've-got-mail," said the excited computer voice.

Why did it always sound so excited? All she ever got was spam mail about weight-loss pills and penis enlargements. Marla was clearly in need of neither; she tossed the half-eaten can of dry tuna fish into the trash and looked back at the screen. Her mail inbox was taking an age to load up.

"You've-got-mail."

Expletives tumbled out of Marla's mouth as dozens of spam mails racked up onscreen. "AS C CONJOINMENT" one read idiotically, "WANT TO CUM LIKE A FIREHOSE?" asked another. *Jesu* why did she even bother? She was just about to turn the machine off, when she saw it. There, tucked away among the junk mail was the subject line, "Re: Article Submission".

Marla clicked on it and gazed at the email header, almost unable to scroll down and read the rest. It had been a couple of weeks since she'd submitted the feature, a travelogue cannibalized from her diary entries while backpacking across Europe during more prosperous times.

She actually trembled when she clicked the mouse to read the rest of the email.

"Dear Ms Newborne," it read—great, they had already spelled her name wrong, "Ran a similar piece in last month's issue. Please check before sending unsolicited work. We are not taking freelancers right now. Good luck with your career."

The mail wasn't even signed with a name, but from the mail address she could see it was from someone called Sandy.

Well, Sandy was a bitch whoever he/she was. At least they hadn't crucified her work this time. Still, it made Marla feel a little better to sign Sandy's email address up for a few porn sites and dieting newsletters before she went to bed.

Digging some dope from the stash sock under her bed, Marla rolled herself a little nightcap and imagined what tomorrow might bring.

Only disappointment, she thought as she stubbed out the joint. Moments later, and Marla's head was at one with her pillow. Her breathing slowed and became heavier.

Somewhere in cyberspace, a series of electronic pulses conspired together, drawing data from algorithms out in the ether. The data weaved together into text, words gliding towards a pre-determined destination.

Words that became a message, a whisper.

"You've-got-mail," said Marla's computer, and she stirred for a moment before turning over and drifting off into a troubled sleep.

Chapter Three

Rain pounded on the window, waking Marla from her nightmare. She'd been crushed inside a prairie dog listening to her bones breaking. Peering through sleep-encrusted eyes she realized she'd left the computer on all night. Wonderful. She'd have to feed the electricity meter before she fed herself, as usual.

Yawning her way across to the kettle, Marla made herself a cup of coffee. She flopped down in front of the laptop and fingered the track pad, ready to shut it down. As the screen lit up in response to her touch, something caught her eye. One new email. She couldn't help but look, even though she knew it would end in disappointment.

"FAO: Marla Neuborn—employment offer" read the email header.

What the hell? Marla rubbed her eyes, looked again. *More junk surely*, she thought as she opened the message. She began to wake up as she gulped coffee and scanned the text; *Dear Ms. Neuborn—acquired your details from agency—ideal candidate—a paradise of opportunity—immediate start...*

Spam. She hit "delete", turned off the computer and downed the rest of her coffee on the way to the shower room.

Marla tried to keep her soapy skin away from the slimy tiles and mildewed shower curtain. The landlady hadn't updated the facilities at the "Mansions" in years. And every day, Marla had to run the gauntlet of the hallway outside her room to reach the communal shower room. Sometimes, like today, she got lucky and didn't run into one of the building's lecherous inmates.

Marla dropped the shampoo bottle onto her foot. *Fuck*. As she bent down to retrieve it, the shower curtain clung to her in a vile embrace. Joining the assault, the showerhead began to sputter cold water onto her back. Cursing wildly, she retreated to the safety of the sink and rinsed her hair there. Looking at her reflection in the chipped mirror, Marla spied a pimple forming on her chin. Brushing her teeth angrily, she climbed back into her bathrobe and sloped out into the hallway.

Glinting eyes peered out at her from a crack in her neighbor's door. The dirty bastard was spying on her again. As she hurried by, she heard pornographic moaning from the TV set inside—the sound made Marla wince. This place was really beginning to get under her skin. She pushed her door. She locked herself out. *Oh no. Oh please for the love of God no, not again*. Now she'd have to face the landlady and get the spare set of keys, which would no doubt be accompanied by a lecture about not losing her keys. That lecture would be followed by the one about paying her rent on time. Marla suddenly felt suicidal. Maybe suicide wasn't such a bad idea. Just kidding, she reminded herself, but it wasn't such a bad idea, what she was thinking. The window to her room was still open after all. Strangely amused that her fear of her landlady was so great she'd be willing to risk life and limb to avoid speaking to her, Marla quickly ducked back into the bathroom.

Wrapping her bathrobe tightly around her, she opened the window as wide as it would go and looked out over the ledge. It was certainly wide enough for her to climb across, then she just had a short section of roof to navigate before she could climb in through her window. A pigeon flapped noisily from the eaves above her, egging her on with its dumb show. Marla clambered out, wincing at the chill air as it penetrated her bathrobe and whistled, freezing, around her nethers. Clinging to the arch of roof tiles above her she set off along the ledge, walking sideways like a crab. The wind picked up and her bathrobe rose up, billowing out suddenly and making her shriek like an embarrassed schoolgirl. It wasn't long before she heard the wolf whistles from below. Great, someone had seen her—and invited his pals along to witness the spectacle too. Let them look, sad bastards. She wished the pimple had been forming on her backside, let them wolf whistle at that for a while. Marla reached the sloping section of the roof as the aural humiliation of hoots and lascivious cries railed on below her.

~~Don't look down. Don't . Gasps from below now as her foot slid off the side of the roof, loosening tile, which smashed noisily on the ground far below. Then loud cheers rang out as she corrected herself and clambered on up the slope to her window. She climbed inside and turned to shut the window. As she did so, she glimpsed a face pressed up against the glass of the window nearest her. Her neighbor. He was naked. She closed the curtains.~~

Grabbing clothes from the floor, Marla dressed in a hurry and stuffed her door keys into her pocket, vowing never to lock herself out again. Her make-up bag was almost exhausted, so she decided not to bother. She'd save what was left for a hot date. She snorted. *Like that'd ever happen.*

Minutes later and she was downstairs. Envelopes lay in disarray on the doormat. More damn junk mail. Still, she picked them up and dutifully separated them into neat little piles for the Mansion inmates. The landlady would like that. And a happy landlady was a forgiving landlady—she hoped, wincing as she replayed the sound of the roof tile shattering on the ground. Marla's rent check was going to bounce again this month.

Sighing heavily, Marla saw the logo on the envelope first. It was one of those clunky, important corporate stamps. Then she saw her name, and a single rubber-stamped word in red.

URGENT.

Wincing at the chicory taste of the coffee, Marla put the cup down and added another two sugars. This was the worst café in London, no question, but on quiet days they never hassled her to free up the table. And today she really needed to be away from her crappy bed-sit and out of the rain.

She picked up the letter and read it again, slowly this time.

“Dear Ms. Neuborn,

I am writing with reference to a potential offer of employment. We acquired your details from the agency and believe you could be an ideal candidate. The position is one of housekeeping in a private Mediterranean community owned and operated by our parent group The Consortium Inc. We are confident you'll agree that the job placement offers a paradise of opportunity to the right person. Please contact us to arrange an interview. Please note; should you prove to be a good fit, the job requires an immediate start.

Kind regards,

J G Mathers, Human Resources

The Consortium, Inc.”

Marla looked down at the cup. *The agency?* Surely she'd dropped off their records ages ago. A sickly beige skin had already begun to form on her coffee.

Marla folded up the letter, paid the waitress, and headed for the nearest phone booth.

Chapter Four

The voice on the phone had been friendly enough, but The Consortium Inc. Building was pure corporate terror. Nestled in among the higgledy-piggledy side streets of the City district, it had taken Marla three bus routes to find it. And so here she was, craning her neck up at it, a modernist megalith of black marble cladding and smoked glass. She took a breath, licked her lips, and stepped into the revolving doors.

Sealed off from the hustle and bustle of outside, the foyer was calm and still. Marla's footsteps echoed as she approached the reception desk. The receptionist peered at her through layers of make-up, took her name and directed her to the sixth floor. Marla shuddered as she stepped into the elevator—any minute now and they'd find her out, pull her file, hear from the agency about her Big Mistake. *It'd be a blessed relief, she thought, then I wouldn't have to go through with the damn interview.*

Ding. The elevator doors opened and Marla found herself in another reception area. This time, the desk was vacant, with a closed door just beyond it. Marla sat down in a brown leather sofa and waited. She was still, miraculously, five minutes early. The voice on the phone had seemed delighted that she could make it that very afternoon. *Wouldn't be so delighted if they'd read the tabloids*, she thought, beginning to panic again. Palms sweating, Marla stood up and opted for pacing the room instead of sitting. It helped. Her heart rate slowed and her hands became merely clammy instead of wet hot.

"Ms. Neuborn?"

Marla turned, and the voice on the phone now had a face, handsome and tanned, with a prominent jaw and strong hairline. He'd either had work done, or simply looked after himself. Maybe a bit of both.

"Marla?"

His teeth were so white.

"Yes that's me," she spluttered.

He thrust his hand out. Marla discreetly wiped her palm on her hip and shook his hand. What a greasy hand—the guy definitely worked out.

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Mr. Welland. But you can call me Bill. Come on in."

Welland's office was the cleanest room Marla had ever been in. Even her time in hospital had seen more dust than this. He asked her to take a seat and offered her a coffee. Trying not to recline into the soft comfort of the leather swivel chair, she refused the offer of a drink. *Probably spill it all over his desk in a matter of seconds.* Damn her nerves.

"So, I take it our letter came as something of a surprise?"

Marla cleared her throat, "You could say that, yes."

"But a welcome one?"

He beamed at her.

"Of course."

She leaned forward a little, intent now on giving it to him straight. "To be brutally honest, Mr. Welland..."

"Please; Bill."

"Bill. I had kind of given up on that agency... I've sort of, moved on since signing up with them."

"No problem Ms Neuborn."

"Marla."

He grinned again. "Marla. Our company has very specific requirements; the right candidate for the right job. We put feelers out everywhere. We have employees from the world over, offices on every

continent. I personally am a firm believer in appointments that are meant to be. Your resume and experience, coupled with your age could make you an ideal candidate for the job.”

Marla braced herself for the questions. So long since she'd done an interview. *Deep breath, don't mess it up.*

“This isn't an interview, as such,” Welland continued, as if clairvoyant. “No, I prefer to keep things as informal as possible. Our meeting is merely an opportunity to tell you more about the position and answer any questions you might have. Okay?”

“Absolutely.”

Marla's voice betrayed her unmistakable relief. Welland didn't seem to notice, or care.

“This isn't your regular job, I can assure you of that. If I were to tell you that it would involve living in real luxury on a Mediterranean island would you have a problem with that Marla?”

His eyes positively twinkled. *Smooth bastard.* Marla shook her head, smiling.

“Good. Now we're past that difficult question,” he chuckled. “Onto the details... The Consortium Inc. represents a quorum of very rich clients, who would like to stay that way. Each of the members has a variety of business interests, and the day-to-day running of these is handled largely by us. One such area entrusted to us is the safekeeping of an island community owned entirely by our clients. Are you with me so far?”

“I'm with you.”

Welland rose and continued speaking as he glanced out at the gloomy city sky.

“The mansions on the island are inhabited very rarely, usually when our clients are taking the annual break or attending a special event on the mainland. This makes it very difficult for them to fulfill their resident status requirements; have you heard of those?”

“I'm... No I don't think I have.”

“No problem, Marla, I'll explain. The system is exactly the same in Monaco and other...prestigious areas; wealthy homeowners are required to prove residential status in order to qualify for generous tax benefits. If they only use their homes for a week or two a year, they don't qualify. So, rather than lose out, they employ housekeepers to keep things in order for them. These employees use up a bit of gas, water and electricity each day, tend to the grounds and generally enjoy all that the lifestyle has to offer.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“Indeed it does,” he turned smiling from the window. “Especially when you also take into consideration the fee you get paid on top. The Consortium holds a monthly salary in an account for you. Once your contract is complete, the money is yours.”

“May I ask...”

“How much? Of course,” he chuckled. “It's a little more than double what the agency was offering you, per hour, as a base rate.”

Marla whistled. She could already see the possibilities; a University course, no more debts, no more crappy bed-sit... She snapped back into reality. *Too good to be true. Has to be.*

“I don't know how to ask this politely...”

“Go ahead.”

“What's the catch?”

Welland chuckled once more. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a folder, sliding it across the smooth surface towards Marla.

“First catch; before we hire you, you must complete this written personality test.”

I already have a personality, Marla was tempted to say. *I don't need to take a test. I hate tests.* She bit her lip.

“You don't have to do it right now. Mail it back to us and we'll let you know in a few days if you've

got the job.”

After a pause, he went on. “~~Second catch; if we hire you, you must agree to be available without~~ interruption for a year. You will not be allowed to leave the island for any reason during this period. That includes illness, and ‘acts of God’. If you break contract, your earnings account will be closed and no monies paid to you. However, I assure you that if your contract doesn’t reach full term for any other reason, then you’ll be paid in full. And the third catch is our secrecy clause; you shall at no point during your employment be advised of the exact location of the island and you will not be permitted to contact the outside world.”

“So, no phone calls?”

“That’s right. No calls, no Internet, no text messages. No physical mail.”

Marla couldn’t disguise her consternation at this restriction. It seemed such a bitter pill after what Welland had offered so far.

The warm smile again. Those white teeth.

“I know it seems draconian, Marla. Believe me, the island is so beautiful you won’t even want to contact the dreary old mainland once you’re there. All our employees say so. Please, take the test with you and give it some thought.”

Marla warmed a little. She picked up the folder and stood up.

“Have you been there? To the island?”

He led her gently to the door.

“You’re kidding, right?” He grinned. “I started out just like you; as a Lamplighter. I loved it so much I joined The Consortium full time. I’m sure once you take the test you’ll work out just fine...”

“A Lamplighter?”

He flicked the light switch off, then on again.

“That’s what we call the island workers.”

Lamplighters.

Marla kind of liked that.

Chapter Five

All the way home, Marla had expected a camera crew to jump out on her. *Surprise! It was a set-up. There is no job, but you've been such a good sport...* She leafed through the personality test Welland had given her. Some of the questions were just plain weird, veering randomly from logic puzzles to the somewhat intrusive. Actually, a TV show set-up might be better than all this prying.

As she climbed the stairs back at her building, Marla had an acute sense that something was wrong. Turning the corner into the hallway, she could see why. The door to her room was wide open. She approached the doorway cautiously, gripping Welland's folder like a shield. Peering into her room, Marla's heart thumped hard with the expectation that an intruder would be peering back at her. But the room was empty.

Marla checked the door lock. The catch was a little screwy as usual and there was no sign that it had been forced. Must not have closed it properly on her way out for the interview. Jesus, when she wasn't locking herself out she was having an open house party. She flopped down on the bed and smiled grimly to herself. The room was such a mess anyway it'd look like it had been burgled whether the door was left open or not. Then she froze. Her laptop was gone.

Moments later, Marla found herself banging on the door of the pervert down the hall. She almost had no recollection of walking to his door; the red mist had carried her here. What if it wasn't him? No. If anyone was going to mess with her things, it was that leech. She pummeled harder on the door, nearly falling inside as it opened. His confused face looked out, half in shadow.

"I want my laptop back, now," spat Marla, harshly.

"Your...what?"

"Don't feign ignorance with me, Mister. I know you took it, so just give it the hell back."

She shoved at the door, hard, knocking him back slightly. There was a faint odor coming from inside, like soured buttermilk. Marla didn't even want to guess where the smell had originated. She did a quick one-eighty of the room. It was immaculately tidy. No laptop. He must've stashed it somewhere, or sold it already.

"Where the hell is it?" She was shouting now.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you feeling all right?"

Marla's red mist solidified into a wall of pent-up rage.

"I've seen you looking at me. Watching my every move. Perving over me when I locked myself out. Biding your time until..."

"What's going on here?"

A sharp voice, from up the hall. *Brilliant.* Marla's landlady was standing there, fixing her with an angry stare. She opted for a defensive stance, raising her hands in surrender.

"My...my room's been burgled. My laptop's gone. I was just asking this guy if he knew anything about it..."

"Accusing me, more like," he said, indignant.

The landlady cleared her throat. "Mr. James is one of my best, most reliable tenants," she said. Her voice wobbled with anger, sounding like a detuned radio announcer. "Unlike you, Miss Neuborn, he always pays his rent on time. I was just on my way up here with this."

She held out Marla's rent check. The bank had rubber stamped it. The words "REFER TO DRAWER" burned into Marla's eyes.

"You have two weeks' notice to vacate your room."

Marla's voice dropped to a breathless retort. "But my laptop has been stolen. I..."

"No buts Miss Neuborn. I warned you last time, three strikes and you're out. This is the third and

last time. And if you bother Mr. James again, I'll be forced to evict you immediately."

~~Marla glared at James. He looked as shocked as she did. Her eyes filled with tears. She turned and~~
ran back to her room, slamming the door.

This time it closed properly.

Chapter Six

A week had passed since she'd been given her notice and Marla still hadn't found a new place. For days now, she'd got up early and headed out to scour the newsagent notice boards and local classified ads—nothing affordable. She'd logged onto countless property websites, using the computers at the local library for lack of a machine of her own. If her friendly local neighborhood pervert hadn't done it, she could only imagine that bastard Carlo had broken in and taken her laptop. *His laptop*. Still she couldn't find anything affordable. Her overdraft was maxed out, and no credit card company would touch her—not with her rating. As usual, the agents were asking for a month's deposit plus six weeks in advance. *Daylight robbery*, frowned Marla as she headed back to the bed-sit, her home for one more week.

Crashing into the bombsite that was her room, Marla kicked aside yesterday's t-shirt, socks and panties. She flopped onto the bed and squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. There had to be some way of appeasing her landlady. Anything would be preferable to the nightmare of moving. If she could just buy some time until she heard about the job.

The job. She'd almost forgotten to mail the personality test back to them after her scene in the hallway the other day. Surely they'd had time to go through it by now? *Probably just a scam*, she thought bitterly, *they'll get back to me and offer me some crappy telemarketing gig*. Sighing, Marla curled up under the womblike darkness of her bedclothes, contemplating dull years of work calling angry strangers through a plastic headset. Perhaps that was her destiny; maybe she should just resign herself to it.

It felt like only minutes had passed when Marla was awoken by a sharp rapping at her door. Blinking tiny traces of sleep from her eyes, she mumbled, "Who is it?" The sharp knocking again, rap-*rap-*rap**. Not her landlady again, not now *please*. Marla shook off the duvet and stomped sleepily over to the door.

It was Mr. James.

"Sorry to disturb you. Were you sleeping?"

"No, not really, I..." Marla tried to waken herself up. "I was just chilling, taking a quick nap."

"There's a phone call for you. On the payphone, downstairs."

"Oh, thanks."

Marla slipped out of the door. Mr. James stepped back to give her some room to get by. An awkward moment passed between them. Marla felt suddenly embarrassed about shouting at him, accusing him. She turned.

"Listen, by the way, I'm really sorry about the other day."

He smiled back at her, "It's okay. No hard feelings. And it sucks—about your laptop, I mean."

"Never really worked properly anyway," said Marla as she headed for the stairs. *I can identify with it*, she thought to herself.

"Ms. Neuborn? We received your personality test. I wanted to personally thank you for taking the time to complete it for us..."

The voice on the phone was just as friendly as before. Friendlier. *Here it comes*, she thought.

"And I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on making the selection."

What? Oh no, not another interview. I'll simply die.

"Ms. Neuborn? Are you still there?"

"Yes I am still. Here."

"Pending contractual arrangements, we'd like to offer you the position of maintenance operative

part of The Consortium's island workforce."

"Oh."

Marla had a sudden, violent, urge to pee.

"Oh!"

"May I ask if you're still interested in the position?"

"Oh yes. Yes. I am." The urge to pee stopped, replaced by vague thoughts of a strong alcohol drink.

"Well I guess that makes you a Lamplighter. Congratulations Ms Neuborn. And welcome to the team. We'll be in touch with all the details."

The walk back to her room was a blur. Marla sat down on the bed, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, her face a tragicomic mask of both reactions. She rolled a celebratory cigarette and breathed the smoke in and out deeply.

Only then did she notice something else was missing from her room, something that had definitely been there when she left to answer the phone. She'd seen them only moments ago. Her used panties from yesterday. She dropped the cigarette into the ashtray and scrambled around on the floor for them. Gone. A sick feeling hit her stomach. Anger building inside her, Marla left the room, cursing the latecomer. She crossed the hallway and stood in front of Mr. James' door. Loud pornography bellowed from inside his room accompanied by his unmistakably urgent grunts and groans.

Marla returned to her room and started packing her rucksack. It was time to get away, far, far away from this rat hole.

Chapter Seven

Welland was waiting for Marla outside Nice airport arrivals in a sleek black open-topped car. He grinned at her as she approached, those perfect white teeth gleaming in the morning sun.

“How was the flight?”

Marla smiled her thanks as he helped with her bag.

“It was Business Class.”

He laughed in recognition as he put his sunglasses on. Marla hadn't flown for a while and had clearly never flown Business before. She looked so much more relaxed than she had on the day of her interview.

“Only the best for our employees, Marla. And you'd better start getting used to life's little luxuries. The island has more riches to offer than Business travel. Think of it as First Class,” he winked slyly. “You're about to get an upgrade.”

“My second today,” giggled Marla.

The car's powerful engine throbbed as he hit the accelerator. Marla grabbed her own sunglasses and they drove out into the bright sunlight. The breeze blew through her hair like a cleansing breath. London and her depressing bed-sit already seemed to be a million miles away. Good riddance. She kicked back in the comfort of the leather passenger seat and looked at the passing cars.

“Comfy?” asked Welland.

“Oh yes,” Marla said as she stretched a little, catlike.

“Good. We have quite a drive I'm afraid, so just relax and enjoy it. There's a boat waiting that will take you to the island. The exact location has to remain...”

“Confidential, I know.”

Back in London, Marla had looked Meditrine Island up on every website she could find. It simply didn't exist—not on any map. Even Google Earth couldn't find it. Doubt had begun to set in, so Marla had asked about it when The Consortium had called to confirm travel arrangements. “Meditrine Island was merely a name, the friendly voice had assured her; the island could only actually be identified by its registration number, latitude and longitude. “Please understand The Consortium's need for secrecy,” the friendly voice had implored. “The assets of our clients would be under considerable risk if every Tom, Dick and Harry knew where the island was located.” If Marla had any doubts, the voice went on, they could cancel her flight at any time. Reassured, Marla had told them that wouldn't be necessary. *Let them keep their secrets, she thought, and I'll keep mine.*

Through her sunglasses, Marla watched the gray airport warehouses and car parks give way to green countryside. For a moment, the sun slipped behind a cloud and Marla shivered, remembering her visit to her neighbor Mr. James. Then the sun blazed back into the blue sky, warming away the gooseflesh on her arms and bathing her face in its warming glow. She vowed that would be last time she'd think of the horrible man, or her horrible past.

The past. She had considered calling her “mother” before jetting off, of course. She'd found herself standing at the payphone at her bed-sit, calling card in hand, scrap of paper in front of her with the number written on it in fading ink. Marla had even picked up the receiver, just for a second, before returning it to its cradle. *From the cradle to the grave*, Marla had thought bitterly, recalling a song she'd once heard at a club with Carlo. No, relations with her final pair of foster parents had ended very badly. Best to leave them that way rather than re-establish contact and then make them end even more spectacularly. What would she have said anyway? *Hello Mrs. Gore, it's Marla, remember that fuck up of a foster daughter you couldn't wait to get rid of? Well, I got a job. A job on a faraway island.* They would just assume she was high again, or finally being sent to jail for her latest heinous crime.

No, it was better to lock up the past and throw away the bloody key.

“We’re here.”

Welland’s tones cut through her thoughts like the very voice of reason. He slowed the car to a halt and half-stood, pointing over the windshield into the distance. They’d arrived at a small harbor. The faint ding-ding of bells rang their greeting. Sun kissed the water, twinkling into the ocean’s distance.

Marla looked out to where Welland was pointing and saw the speedboat, huge, sleek and black like his car. *He had to be kidding.*

“Your chariot awaits.”

She looked wide-eyed at the impressive vessel. Its name had been painted on the front side, *Sent Maiden*.

Welland took Marla’s rucksack from the boot of the car and handed it to her.

“This is as far as I go,” he said. “Island Security will look after you now.”

“Thanks for the ride,” said Marla, “You’re not tempted to take some time off? Sunbathe?”

“Oh, believe me I am *sorely* tempted,” he replied, “But alas, duty calls. Catch a few rays for me, will you?”

Marla nodded. He turned back to the car, then paused.

“And have fun. But work *hard*.”

His eyes shone for a moment before he replaced his shades. As the car roared away, Marla heaved the rucksack onto her shoulder and made her way over to the boat.

A heavy-set man dressed in a black, almost military, uniform waited for her at the foot of a steep ramp leading to the deck area. Rather uncomfortably, Marla clocked the holster on his belt. He was carrying a pistol. She’d been in London for so long, this was the only gun she’d seen outside of the airport.

“Miss Neuborn, I’m Anders, security operative over at Meditrine Island. I’m here to ensure your safe passage to the island. Your safety is my priority. My other priority, of course, is to safeguard the island. So, I’m afraid I’ll have to take you through a quarantine procedure before you board.”

“No problem. No problem at all,” said Marla. This was getting kind of surreal.

Anders led Marla to a low building adjacent to jetty where the boat was moored. Stopping at a thick glass door, he took a plastic card from his belt and swiped it through a reader. The little LED light on the reader turned from red to green, there was a loud click and the door opened. Marla followed him inside and down a dimly lit corridor to another door. He used his swipe-card again and led her into a clinically white room. A long bench ran the full length of the wall at waist height. Anders closed the door behind them, then produced a pair of white rubber gloves from some secret pouch attached to his belt and snapped them on.

“If you’d like to place your bag on the bench please.”

It was more of an order than a request. Marla did as she was told and watched as Anders leaned over the bag as though he was going to launch into an impromptu exercise routine. Instead, he loosened the straps and drawstrings and began rooting through Marla’s rucksack. She averted her eyes with awkward embarrassment as he hit a deep seam of underclothes. Unflinching, Anders continued his search of the main compartment until all her clothes and belongings were lined up on the bench in a parade of shame. Making his way through the side pockets and buckled top compartment, he stopped and pulled out her toiletry bag, then her personal music player. He stood and held both items aloft in his hand. Marla suddenly felt like she’d been caught with a full bag of drugs at some seedy border crossing. Tiny headphones dangled in front of her, conspiring with her toiletries against her.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to confiscate these for the duration of your stay, Miss,” snapped Anders. “The rules state that no liquids, gels, or other cosmetic items are allowed onto the island.”

“But—how will I wash? What about my make-up?”

“Toiletries will be provided from the island’s stores. You will have no need for make-up,” said Anders, “~~In addition no personal electronic device is to be taken onto the island by any employee, no matter how innocuous.~~”

“I thought the rule only applied to phones, laptops, that kind of thing.”

“That’s fine. Your belongings will be returned to you on completion of your contract.”

That’s fine. Easy for you to say when you don’t use eyeliner. One thing was certain—she’d be going on a spending spree as soon as she got paid. She watched Anders take her music player and little toiletry bag, separating them out and placing them into a plastic storage box a little further along the bench. She was going to miss her music almost as much as make-up. *Thank God I didn’t pack an electric razor, all Hell would break loose.*

Anders dropped suddenly into a squatting position, again looking like he might launch into an impromptu workout. He rooted beneath the bench and pulled out a cylindrical container, like a fire extinguisher but smaller. Returning his attention to the bag’s contents, he pointed the nozzle of the cylinder at Marla’s clothes and began to spray them with a fine white mist.

“Hey! What the hell?”

The mist smelled awful, like neat bleach. Marla had no desire for her clothes to smell of bleach. Anders continued spraying, like an automaton in a factory.

“What are you doing to my clothes? That stuff smells horrible!”

Only when he had sprayed every single garment, did Anders put down the cylinder and turn to address Marla.

“Apologies—strict regulations.”

“Regulations about what?”

“Meditrine Island is home to more than just human beings. Dozens of rare species live there too. Plants, insects, birds. You’ve traveled from an overpopulated city, rife with contaminants. We have to disinfect everything you bring with you to the island to safeguard the island’s natural resources. I’m afraid I’ll have to treat your shoes.”

Marla climbed out of her shoes. As he got to work spraying them, she took in what Anders was saying. The environmental message sounded rather strange coming from such a militaristic man. *I’m being lectured on ecology by an armed policeman. Better listen up or he might shoot me.*

“Someone could have explained...”

“It’s done now, miss. Just the clothes you’re wearing to do now.”

“The clothes I’m wearing?”

He gestured at another door.

“Showers are through there. Please use the disinfectant gel provided. Leave your clothes on the bench just outside the door and I’ll process them while you shower.”

Marla scowled at him.

“The smell fades eventually,” said Anders brightly.

Marla turned and headed for the showers before she could say something she might regret.

A faint odor of bleach trailing behind her, Marla lugged her rucksack up the ramp and onto the deck of the sleek black vessel under the watchful eyes of Anders’ deckhands.

“Welcome aboard the *Sentry Maiden*,” saluted Anders.

Anders’ men retracted the ramp and hauled in the docking ropes. The boat’s engine started up in an excitement of white foam and, drifting forward and to one side, the craft began to pick up speed. Marla was on the final leg of her journey to Meditrine Island. She felt clean.

Stratum corneum

The huge man looked at Vera's lifeless body, coldly. Now the kill was over, his real work could begin. He always preferred them when they lay like this—silent and still, not raving and wriggling.

Selecting his finest scalpel from the workbench, he pressed a restraining hand down firmly on the girl's chest and cut into her, just below the neck. His hand as steady as a tiller's, he made yet more cuts in beautifully straight lines. Each one was a crimson ribbon, each one intersecting in his perfect design. Soon the girl's skin was divided up, like tectonic plates floating above the lava of her viscera.

Satisfied with his pattern making, he put the scalpel down and picked up the flesh-comb. He marveled for a moment at its sleek design, surgical steel head, ivory handle. Inserting it into the first intersection, he began to peel back the skin carefully. The red ribbons became folds of velvet meat which he folded lovingly and placed in the basin next to the gurney.

The hardest part was always around the nails, and the face. His mouth locked into a grimace of concentration. The greatest care was required to lift these layers of derma without tearing them. Softly, softly, he worked the skin upwards from her face.

Then, disaster. He caught sight of his reflection in one of the girl's eyes. The dead black pool of her pupil revealed him at once. Why had he looked? Why was *she* looking? The connection broke the spell, and his concentration, at once. Before he could halt his movements, he felt the skin tear at the corner of her eye socket.

Clenching his teeth against the rage, he put aside the flesh-comb and put her eyes out. Both of them. With his thumbs. There, she could mock his mistake no longer. He tore the scalp from her head with a violent wrenching motion. Plunging her blood-slicked hair into the metal waste bin, he struggled for a moment to regain his composure.

Exuding calm, deliberate breaths he vowed to blind the next one before he skinned it. He couldn't afford the tiniest mistake. Absolute perfection was required of him, and of his prey. But the basic matter before him was substandard, distracting him. For absolute perfection, he would have to wait.

He would have to be patient.

Chapter Eight

The crewmembers were a quiet bunch. At the start of the journey, Marla had tried to spark a bit of small talk with one of the security guards, a particularly handsome, dark-skinned guy about the same age as her, mid-twenties. He had politely all but blanked her, explaining that conversation with employees was forbidden while he was on duty. She'd smiled as she turned away from his stony face, but she couldn't help it. His eyes had betrayed him, and for a split second he definitely checked her out, which was more action than she'd had in a long time.

Marla made her way to the head of the boat, enjoying the slightly scary incline and the rocking motion as it sped through the waves. Holding on tight to the handrail, Marla held her head high and breathed in the cool, refreshing sea air. Every now and then, ocean spray coated her skin and she luxuriated in its touch. The wind picked up a notch and the craft altered course slightly, prompting her to look aft. Beyond the rear of the boat, Marla could only see a wide expanse of blue, curving as if to the edge of the world. Turning back to the head of the boat, the same vista greeted her. She really was in the middle of nowhere, hurtling ever onwards in this black vessel to...where exactly?

Several minutes later, her eyes finally gave the answer. In the far distance Marla could just pick out a vague landmass. Anders hollered to his men, barking orders. Within seconds, the boat was a hive of activity and Marla was ushered to the rear deck by Mr. Handsome.

"Almost home, miss," he said softly, out of earshot of his crewmates.

Home. Marla leaned back against the rear rails and craned her neck out to see. The island's details were becoming clearer as the boat ploughed on towards it. She could now make out sharp craggy rocks, with waves crashing onto them dramatically. Above this steep rocky perimeter were signs of lush vegetation, and terraces cut into the cliffs and hills. Nestled there were several white buildings, huge mansions the size of which Marla had only ever seen in the pages of celebrity magazines. The boat's engine slowed to a bass line throb and the crewmen prepared the craft for docking at a wooden jetty. A security hut stood at the end of the jetty, guarding a set of winding steps that led up to the island.

Anders instructed Mr. Handsome to escort Marla through security clearance. He gallantly pulled her rucksack onto one manly shoulder and led her to the security hut. Another quick bag check—

This is worse than Heathrow...

—and Marla was soon walking the length of the jetty towards the twisting steps.

"Sorry I couldn't really talk to you earlier miss," said Mr. Handsome, "Anders runs a pretty tight ship."

"Literally. And please don't call me miss. I'm Marla."

He beamed. "Nice name. I'm Adam."

Marla smirked, wondering if his surname really was "Handsome". From the way the smile played across his jaw and cheeks, revealing deep dimples, she truly thought it should be.

Steady girl.

"Always good to see a new face around here," he continued, "Not often I get picked to go to the mainland. I enjoy it, you know, being on the boat."

She wrinkled her nose at the smell of her skin, still vaguely bleach-scented. Great, she smelled like the bathrooms at King's Cross railway station.

"When was the last time you were off the island then? And do they make you shower in this gross awful stuff too?" asked Marla.

He smiled. It was a nice smile.

"A few w... Hey, sorry. I'm not allowed to talk about stuff like that. More than my job's worth."

Marla laughed. A sharp, shrill cackle that echoed off the rocks and left her feeling immediately embarrassed. Adam was silent. She looked up at him and realized he wasn't joking.

"You're serious aren't you?" she said, a mixture of surprise and apology.

"Yeah. You think Anders is strict, just wait 'til you meet Fowler."

"Who's Fowler?"

"You'll find out in a minute. My orders are to take you to his office right now."

"Why?"

"Induction," said Adam.

"Induction? That sounds a bit ominous."

She fixed Adam with a concerned look.

"Don't worry," he said, "Just agree with everything he says, then you can get on with enjoying your cushy new job."

Marla laughed again, a little less shrilly this time.

Fowler remained seated behind the desk for a moment as Adam showed Marla into his office. The shadowy room was situated deep inside the red brick Security Headquarters, built on a flat promontory overlooking the jetty. Behind Fowler, a wide wall-to-wall window the size of a movie screen gave an impressive view of the ocean.

"Our new arrival. Miss Neuborn, Chief." Adam's voice was now stiff, formal.

"Thank you Hudson," Fowler said, "And tell Anders I want to see him just as soon as I'm done here."

Hudson. Well it sounds a bit like Handsome, Marla thought.

Adam nodded, dismissed, quietly closing the door after him. Fowler gave Marla the once over before standing up and offering his hand.

"Welcome to Meditrine Island, Miss Neuborn. I'm Chief of Security Fowler."

She shook Fowler's hand. Christ, he had an iron grip. And long sharp fingernails for a guy.

"Please. Take a seat, Miss Neuborn."

She did so. Fowler remained standing. He wasn't an especially tall man and he evidently knew it. But now he was towering over her, the interrogator and his suspect. He pulled a series of documents from his desk drawer and placed them in front of her, not taking his eyes off her for one second.

"This is the new New Testament," he said dryly.

Marla picked up the first document, emblazoned with a "Consortium Inc." corporate logo. It depicted a world bisected by a flaming sword, around which was curled an angry looking snake. Subtle.

"Rules and regs. The only things that make my world go round. I need you to absorb these to the letter, Miss Neuborn. If you can do that for me, I'll be most grateful."

She couldn't quite place his accent. He sounded like a Scotsman who'd spent most of his life on a Texan ranch.

"I'll do my best," she replied.

Fowler's features dropped for a moment, then adjusted themselves into something resembling a friendly smile. Marla was suddenly finding it hard to keep eye contact.

"Music to my ears."

Finally, he sat down, stiff as a board in his swivel chair. Fowler truly looked like a man for whom relaxation meant a ten-mile jog through enemy territory, a heavy pack of incendiary devices on his back.

"Talking of which, music is not allowed on the island. Neither is liquor, or drugs. Especially drugs. Gatherings of more than two persons are also strictly prohibited. All these regulations, plus the res

are in your dockets there.”

“Gatherings...” began Marla. This was all beginning to sound a bit extreme.

“It may sound strict,” Fowler interjected, “But security’s responsibility to The Consortium Inc. is paramount. Your position here as a Lamplighter is built upon a set of values that we’ve worked hard to maintain ever since this community was created. Our contract with each other is one of trust. We trust you to abide by the rules—and you trust us to let you get on with your job.”

He gestured at the documents on the desk. “Talking of such, your job specs are also in there. They detail your daily task rota, working hours, break allocation and so forth. I already have a hard copy of your contract on file here, so that’s all good.”

At least I get to take breaks, Marla thought. She’d begun to think detention centers had fewer rules than this gig.

Fowler stood up again, offering his hand once more.

“Welcome on board, Miss Neuborn.”

She looked nonplussed and really couldn’t hide it.

“You’ll get used to it in no time, have no fear,” he continued.

“Thanks,” she said as she shook his hand, already feeling a little wary of Fowler—afraid of him even.

“Splendid. Now, exit this building, take a left and head up the path to the residential area. One of your fellow Lamplighters will be waiting for you there to show you the ropes. Ah, and don’t forget your documents.”

Marla picked them up quickly. The truth was she couldn’t get out of Fowler’s office fast enough. The air in there was just a little too close.

In stark contrast, the fresh island air outside was lovely. Marla made her way up the steep dusty path with Fowler’s directions echoing in her ears. Bright mimosa flowers and wide carob trees lined the path, watched over by towering palms and massive euphorbia. The largest plants must have grown here for years, long before people had come to this island. And now she was here too. All around her crickets chirped and birds sang their welcome to her over the soft whisper of a welcomingly warm sea breeze. Taking a deep lungful of fresh, clean air, Marla closed her eyes and paused for a moment before pressing on up the slope.

Reaching the summit, she got her first look at how The Consortium Inc. members had spent the millions. Lush gardens framed by intricate walkways gave way to a huge swimming pool and beyond that, a building. Not so much a house, but rather a palace, this fantastical construction of glass, steel and white stucco caused Marla to gasp. She strolled into the gardens, turning this way and that to take in the elegantly informal planting, smiling at the way the afternoon sunlight danced through the trees and onto the winding stone path. As she neared the swimming pool, Marla heard faint splashing sounds.

The swimmer was doing a lazy backstroke, slowly making her way across the length of the pool. Reaching the end, she flipped over and pushed her way up and onto the little metal ladder that gave access to the poolside. Leaving wet footprints on the warm slabs, she walked over to a sun lounger and grabbed an oversized fluffy white towel. As she dried off her hair, she saw Marla approaching from the garden.

“Hey! You must be the new girl!”

Her voice matched her looks, American, sunny and deeply curvaceous. A year or two older than Marla, perhaps. The yellow of her bikini suited her tanned complexion and infectious white smile. Marla felt as though a talking sunflower was greeting her.

“I’m Marla.”

“Good to meet you. I’m Jessie. I guess you’ve already met Scowler?”

She gestured to a vacant sun lounger next to hers. Marla sat down opposite her as Jessie continued drying her hair.

“Scowler...?” Marla laughed, suddenly getting the joke. She was a little disoriented by Jessie’s good humor, especially after Fowler’s boot camp-style induction.

“I can see he’s got you good and spooked with his induction crap. Don’t worry, he’s harmless really, just doesn’t like us having too much fun. He’s what you Brits would call a ‘little Hitle y’know? Hey, I’ll throw some clothes on and show you around, okay?”

“Cool. Thanks for doing this on your day off.”

“Day off?” Jessie cackled, “Honey, this is a *work day*.”

She shimmied away to get changed, singing to herself. Marla looked at the clear inviting depths of the swimming pool and marveled at what Jessie had just said. This was a *work day*.

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