



JAMES SLATER

A Claustrom excerpt

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By James Slater
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AT THE ARENA ENTRANCE, what should have been an open area and a wide panoramic view of the circular prison floor, its tiered balconies of inmate cells looking down on it from above, had become of thicket of greenery. Plants like he'd never seen before. The growth was so thick that light wasn't even visible between the wall of leaves, vines and branches. This was something new. The post show was always interesting, but this was a new twist. Grinder reached out and ran his hand over a large heart-shaped leaf. It was huge, and he could feel its cool moisture on his hand. Like some plant right out of one of Earth's restricted forest preserves. But this was different. He paced back and forth. A few yards away, he saw others in his same state of curiosity. Examining, touching, looking for a way in or a way through to see what, if anything, lay on the other side of this jungle wall.

The render was exquisite. Where here, a few minutes before, he'd seen water and the grand finale of the staged naval battle, now it was transformed into a scene few humans were ever allowed to experience. On Earth, few were accepted into the special corps of Park Service rangers. Special forces was more like it. They had the responsibility of growing and defending earth's forested areas. They lived a life of fresh air amidst the divine aromas of natural plant life. And shot trespassers on sight, fertilizer for fresh growth to save Earth—that was their designated purpose. He'd heard there were some green areas developed by cities where humans were allowed, but that human visitation covered them like ants on a hill, hiding the natural beauty. There were two Earths, really. The overpopulated urban areas, which covered roughly 75 percent of the planet's inhabitable terrain, and the unpopulated, highly defended forest, jungle and farm preserves that scrubbed human carbon dioxide and enabled continued human existence. He'd never been to one, even to look at it from the outside. His time on Earth was restricted to living in the endless urban sprawl, the concrete jungle, an environment that provided everything humans could dream up, except maybe the one thing they really needed. And here it was, right in front of him. He had no idea if these renders replicated actual plants from Earth or if they sprang from the fantasy of a software programmer from somewhere within its urban fabric, who like him, had never seen or touched a tree or a leaf or a plant or a vine. After a few feet of searching, he found an area of plant life that looked less dense and pressed inside. He used his hands to move the pendulous leaves and vines from his path as he moved forward, and the green growth swished behind him, enclosing him in its leafy darkness. Within a few steps slivers of light began to appear from behind the dense foliage. The edge of the growth ended abruptly, and he squinted at the brightness of the white sand before him. On either side of him, a brilliant crescent of beach stood out starkly against the greenery of the jungle wall and sloped gently down to clear

turquoise ocean waters that lapped at the sandy shore. He shook his head in wonder. Here and there along the strand, he saw women. Topless women, no less. Some in the water, others walking through the sand, drinks in their hands offering them to the newcomers, who were in the process of emerging from the jungle wall and stripping out of their prison attire. The heat quickly made its way through his clothes, and as the dampness of sweat broke over his chest, he followed suit. He stripped to his shorts and felt the sand begin to burn his feet as he abandoned his clothes in a pile and took a few quick steps to find refuge in the clear water. He looked in awe at the open ocean before him. In the back of his mind, he knew that he still stood inside the prison arena, but his eyes and mind told him differently. A few wisps of white clouds stood against a brilliant blue sky beyond.

Before he could even fathom the view, a few feet in front of him, a head popped out of the water. The hair was short and fair and the smile was brilliant. She stood, and Grinder saw this was not one of the topless servers. She couldn't be more than a few birthdays past her 20th. Her blue bikini top restrained her well-formed chest, and there was something familiar about her face he couldn't place. It didn't matter. In contrast to the blondness of her hair, her skin was sun-darkened and well oiled. Water beaded in droplets and streamed back into the ocean. She ran her hands over her face and over her head, slicking her locks back, her green eyes complimenting the sky behind her nicely. She was still smiling. It was tinged with a sense of familiarity, and as she beckoned with a nod of her head, she sent his mind into a storm of confusion as she spoke.

"Hey you."

Those two words took him back years. The part of him that needed to maintain his cool, in-control persona responded automatically, attempting to cover his surprise.

"Hey," he said.

"Pete. It's me."

Pete. Peter. He hadn't heard that name for years. The man who was Peter Grindstaff had been Petey, and then Pete, then Peter if it was an adult conversation and Peter Tiberius Grindstaff if he had done something to infuriate his mother. But for years now it was Grinds or Grinder. This was a voice from the past. The voice was familiar and so was the face. His mind turned cartwheels, and his face was tight as if his mental energy was somehow expending a tremendous amount of physical energy, too.

"Hey," he said again.

His mind raced, putting the pieces together. It took a moment, and in that moment, slight as it was, his face had already betrayed him.

Her smile dissolved to a smirk as she watched the shock and pleasure take control of the expression he realized was now plastered all over his face. No secrets here. She stood before him now, tawny limbs dripping in the warm sun, just as she had when he was a teenager.

"Oh my God," That was it. He'd run out of words; his emotions muted his ability to speak.

She put hands on her hips and stretched backward, displaying her tight, tanned body, a live swimsuit model on the beach posing for an advertisement.

"You like?"

Their two-word conversation wasn't getting them anywhere, but he still struggled to speak.

"How did—" he began before he trailed off again.

"Sorry," she said. "I know this is a real surprise. Maybe I shouldn't have pulled it off as abruptly as I did."

Forget it. She could do the talking.

He matched her smile and reached out to her, embracing her tightly, the memories returning in a rush. He held her at arm's length and examined her more closely. *Amazing.*

"Pete, did you ever get to a point in your life where you wish you could go back and make different choices? Change everything? If you think about it, it wouldn't take much. Even a single choice to choose a different friend, a different husband. Choose a different career. Choose a different place to live. They're all interrelated. Me? I never had regrets. Everything seemed to happen for me exactly as I planned."

Yes. He remembered. *The beautiful rich girl. Family money. She could and did have everything she wanted.*

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "And I never thought about it when I knew you. When you have money, and not just a little money, but real money, you no longer need it. Strange isn't it? People give you things. They do things for you. Funny thing was, I never had any money."

He tilted his head and furrowed his brow, questioning the truth of her statement with his eyes. She was laughing.

"It's true! It was always my father who had money. His business had money. My husband had money. Lots of it. But I never had money, and for a long time, the whole concept of money was foreign to me. I had an off-Earth house. I rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. I never gave it a second thought. I lived my dream, only it wasn't my dream. It was my mother's dream, and I was living it for her. She was living it, too, of course, but for a really long time, she told me what I wanted, and I believed her. And then one day—"

She paused, her smile fading and eyes growing distant as she gazed past his shoulder.

"And then one day my father died."

He reached out and squeezed her hand. "I'm so sorry, Rachel," he whispered.

She blinked twice, and her smile returned.

"All of a sudden I had money. I was in charge. I always thought my mother and father were happy together, that they had everything anyone could ever want in a relationship. But without him, I began to realize that it wasn't him she loved, but

the person the money made him. She was in love with the lifestyle. And she didn't skip a beat. Like me she had no clue about money, but unlike me, she had no aptitude for it. I took control of the family money, and even though she encouraged it, she resented it. She remarried a few years later and hasn't said two words to me in years."

He shook his head. "Money changes everything and everyone."

"You got that right. My peckerwood husband thought he needed something more than me, so I took all of his. Maybe he's happy now with this whore girlfriend."

He shot her a look.

"I'm serious," she said, a half-laugh still in her voice. "He met her at a company gambling retreat on Midway. She actually was a whore. He probably needs something more than her now. Anyway, with all the money in the world, you'd think I'd find a way to be happy. As it turns out, not so much. I was alone. I partied. I traveled. I partied. The business ran itself really."

"Business?"

"Asteroid exploration and mining. It's huge. Turns out, I have quite the business sense. Sense enough to draft a company constitution and hire some smart people to run it. But anyway, there I was; I had everything, but I didn't have a clue what I wanted. I was never alone, but I was always lonely. I tried all kinds of drugs and treatments, none of which were healthy for me, until I finally hit on it. I needed to go back in time."

He looked at her quizzically, an eyebrow raised.

She laughed again.

"Not really go back it time," she said, "But aside from putting me in an early grave, you'd be surprised what all that money can do."

He looked more closely at her face. There were subtle differences. Knowing now who she was, he compared the new Rachel with the teen Rachel from his memory. Her cheekbones were marginally sharper and her nose made less of a button and more of a statement. These differences had disguised her at first glance, but her voice and her eyes, those green eyes couldn't hide for long. She smiled with them. He swam in them momentarily, his teen infatuations reignited. There was something else. Time had a way of pulling tricks on the mind, but her body seemed to have evolved as well. Or was it just his memory? It didn't matter. She'd been hot then, and she was hot, maybe hotter, now.

She said, "Nice, eh?"

Damn the two-word exchanges.

He said nothing as he gazed up and down the curves of her tanned and glistening and no doubt expensive shape, nodding wordlessly.

"Not that. This."

It wasn't her body she was referring to, but the larger environment. She was extending her hand, beckoning to the rendered beach scene behind her.

He stepped back and surveyed the scene more closely.

"Sure. It's a beautiful beach." He stopped his sentence short as he realized two things, one after the other. This wasn't just any beach. He looked back at her quickly, her green eyes nodding in anticipation as his mind raced to catch up.

"Bahamas."

"Do you remember?"

As if he could forget. It had been his teenage fantasy, and then it had happened. The girl, the beach. The rest. He'd remember those two weeks for the rest of his life. And here it was again, but it caught him so unaware, he hadn't even recognized his own fantasy. Now he turned a circle in place, a 360-degree gaze as he drank it all in again and realized his second thing.

This was her creation. This was her way of going back in time.

That's what she told him. Money changes everything.

"You been sittin' on some sugar?" she asked in her faux-cheesy pickup line voice that no one but her could pull off. Her eyes twinkled. "'Cause that is one sweet ass."

He was still catching up. "You did this."

"My vision and my, what would you call it? My substantial resources."

"Of all the possibilities in the universe, you chose a two-week teenage boyfriend? I don't believe it. You were my fantasy. I was your— well, I don't know what I was, but certainly not your fantasy."

"You're right," she acknowledged. "You weren't really what I wanted, but the more I thought about it after you left, you were what I needed most. You were intelligent. Loyal. You knew exactly what you wanted. You wanted to make a better world, a better life. For everyone. It wasn't terribly realistic, but you were so serious that your life had to make a difference, that it was the one thing I kept coming back to over and over. Plus, you weren't bad looking either. So now I'm unencumbered. Free. And no offense to you, but part of me wanted to see if I could do it. Could I track you down? And if so, what would be my play? I do have to admit, I was surprised to find you in prison."

A momentary shiver of fright streaked through him, and he froze. But she was being earnest like she'd never been earnest before, and she continued, non-stop.

"But I figured, what the hell. I'd done things when I was my other self that should have landed me in prison. To me it didn't make a bit of difference. So there I was. I had this random whim about reinventing myself. And then I thought, why stop there? Why not follow the inspiration to its conclusion? And once I had the idea, I also saw some potential for some side benefit, and not just for myself. Well, actually, a good portion for myself, but it wasn't just about the financial benefit. I was stretching my wings and my connections. It's amazing what people would do for me when I asked them. The ideas just started to flow."

She was talking quickly, one thought on top of the other as her explanation spilled out of her mouth. His looks had never hurt him, but that was never

something he thought a lot about.

"Look where it got me," she finished.

She looked at him, saying nothing for a moment.

How much did she know? How much information had her substantial resources purchased?

"I thought about it forever. I obsessed over it. My carefree life went on with its ups and downs. And when I was down, I'd rewind my life and obsess over the decisions I'd made. If I could go back, what would I do differently? And each time I did that, I'd come back to you, and your insistence that your life had to matter. At a certain point, this became possible. The Casinos are forever searching for new ideas. New fantasies their Earth guests can't say no to. This one's mine. It seems to be working well now in its test phase."

"None taken," he said.

She'd been on a short, excited little journey with her mind, and she looked at him oddly.

He clarified. "I don't take offense at not being the central inspiration for your project. In fact, this just might be the biggest stroke my ego ever got. In my life."

She raised her hands above her head, grinning as she twirled around in the ankle-deep water, a wet victory dance. "Yay, me!" she said. Her smile dazzled him.

"Look, Peter, and this is only if you're interested, I want to go back and give us a chance. If you're interested, of course. A proper chance. Not like before. My vision is a lot clearer than it was last time we were together on a beach."

Was she serious?

Because if she was, everything in his life, what was left of it anyway, was about to change.

"So, you know I'm in prison, right? You know that's not something you just buy your way out of."

She looked back at him, like he hadn't heard anything she'd said. She shook her head slowly as she spoke. "I wouldn't be so sure about that one. But listen to me. You're stunned. You don't know what to say. I'm sorry, Petey."

She changed the subject abruptly.

"C'mon," she said with a sly smile. "I want to take you to another world."

She had probably said that before. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. The Bahamas had been another world. And they had been together in another world. And when a teenage boy and his girlfriend are alone on a beach, there's only one possible meaning that would run through his mind. It wasn't rocket science. Anatomy, maybe, but for him, it had just been a whole lot of magic. Now he wasn't so sure what she meant as she tugged his hand, urging him forward toward the end of the beach.

She was right. Up and down the beach now, the prisoner crowd was laughing, drinking, gawking. This was a whole new level of after-party.

"C'mon, she said again, taking his hand, "I want to show you something."

They walked hand-in-hand through the shallow water. They didn't say much, just enjoyed the sensations of the beach revelers, the hot sun and the cool ocean waves tickling their feet. In his teens, this would have been heaven. It certainly was now. A 10-minute walk landed them at the end of the strand, the white sand ending abruptly with the dense wall of jungle meeting the lapping ocean. She pulled him on with her hand.

"Back into the jungle?" he asked.

She winked at him. "This is the best part."

She parted the hanging green vines with her left hand, dragging him behind her with her right.

He couldn't let go. Not now. Not ever.

He held up his hand before him as they made their way through the foliage, missing only an occasional branch or leaf that slapped his face. As before, darkness closed in, with only a dim outline and a cool damp sensation of a new environment ahead.

The dense jungle ended abruptly, and he caught his breath as they stepped onto a wide bamboo platform. Below them the ground dropped away to nothing. They were near the top of a canopy, the jungle floor, a hundred, maybe two-hundred feet below. He stopped short, jerking her enthusiastic stride to a halt and drinking it all in.

Above them, the canopy served as their rooftop. Here and there, it let shafts of light through to the jungle below. She hadn't been kidding. This was a whole different world. Maybe he should pay more attention to what she was really saying. The whole sweet ass thing had thrown him off mentally. She played well to the school boy fantasy. It was always hard to tell. Anyway, even if he was just being paranoid, and living in a prison will do that to you, playing closer attention couldn't hurt. Even in this hell-hole, he still had a lot to lose. He wondered again just how much of his history she had uncovered. She seemed to have done it so easily. And did he really believe her story that he'd been the inspiration for her life-changing decision?

Once upon a time he believed in living a life that mattered. A life that made a difference. Hell, maybe he still did.

Sometimes that whole concept of life's meaning got lost here. But he was here, and he was still alive, and that said something about his instincts. He looked at her again, this time with fresh eyes and a bit of skepticism. She looked back. It didn't help. Whatever was on her mind was reflected clearly on her face, and what he saw were thoughts of sincerity. It had been decades after only a few weeks, but there were a few things he knew instinctively. This was one of them. She truly believed what she said.

Before them a rope bridge stretched out from the edge of the platform, a hundred meters if it was a centimeter. Suspended in the air, it angled up slightly and ended in some kind of tree house structure. It was hard to make out details at

this distance, but it was a mansion compared to his cell, the cell he'd be back to quickly enough.

She scampered ahead of him out onto the bridge, nothing but boards and ropes and air between her and the jungle floor below.

She nodded with a tilted head toward the tree house, her hands out, balancing her delicious form between the rope bridge's twin suspension lines that connected the house with the platform.

"You wanna sleep over?"

"No snakes, right?"

"Of course not," she said, and her eyes feigned a hurt look that quickly melted into a mischievous grin. "Well maybe one."

He couldn't help but smile. He wasn't sure how much sleep they'd be getting. He stepped forward to grasp the support line himself as he stepped onto the bridge. The bridge was swaying now with her forward motion. Backward actually. She had turned and was now making progress toward the treehouse, backing away from him.

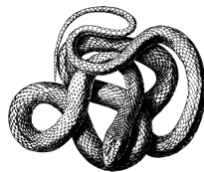
"We don't have much time. You better hurry."

She was taunting him.

He watched her receding figure as he took his second step, more quickly this time.

"You'd better run," he called back.

She did.





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IF YOU LIKED THIS story, check out *Claustrom*, the full sci-fi adventure from which this story is excerpted:

When the executive transport Raven sustains damage from a pirate attack on the first leg of its return flight to Earth, Captain Durt Larson puts down in the desert of the prison planet, Claustrom. Marooned, an accountant, a security specialist, an orphaned pirate and an heir to a mining fortune must now join forces with the Raven's crew to face the planet's extreme environment and outwit criminal mastermind Wislon Simms, a.k.a. "The Wiz," to uncover planet's hidden secret.

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