

CHAPTER ONE

JOANNA (The Bandana Initiative)

SOMETIME DURING THE crossing to Big Island, a dark green presence in the gray rain soaked afternoon, I noticed a shift in wind. The breeze came at us now from the northwest, a fair weather quarter. Then clouds dispersed and patches of blue sky appeared. The air felt dryer as the trailing mass of clouds was swept away revealing the declining sun a couple hands above the horizon. The clearing sky lifted everyone's spirits. By the time boats were beached and unloaded, Big Island's dripping evergreens were bathed in sunlight. Hidden in the forest shadows a white throated sparrow sang its *Old Sam Peabody* tune solemnly in the brightening air. Diminishing waves gently lapped the rocky shoreline.

"This could be the right time for that team building thing we talked about back at base," Eve said, as she, Joel and I stood watching the girls set up their tents among the evergreens.

"You know we're all wet and tuckered out," I replied. "We could stew up some Dinty Moore on the Coleman two-burner, have a quick group, and crawl into our sleeping bags."

"I'm not saying they'll like the idea," Eve answered, "but I think they'll run with it just the same. Besides, Joanna's lead girl this week. She'll have to jump in with both feet to pull this off." I knew there was a reason, as senior instructor, that I depended on Eve to run team-building activities and trouble shoot special topics during daily therapy groups. Joanna had been designated leader by therapists and field staff at the weekly turnover meeting. She'd been doing well, but needed practice stepping up and taking charge.

"What do you think, Joel," I said.

"Can't hurt to throw it at them," he replied.

"OK, let's see what these girls have left in their tanks," I said.

We called Joanna over and outlined the exercise. When she heard our pitch the petite, freckled redhead threw up her arms. Under her breath she let out a low teenage growl.

"Listen, chief," Joel said, looking Joanna in the eyes, "You are the boss girl! You can make this happen!" He waited, his head cocked, a wrinkled grin on his face.

"I am the boss, I am the boss," Joanna muttered, with a shrug and a rolling of her eyes. She would be the one to beat the drum among the girls, and though she was a little girl with a little voice, we knew she could throw her weight around like a bantam rooster when she had to. She wasn't always like this. Early in her stay Joanna had sat slump-shouldered off by herself, her legs tightly crossed, and had listened wide-eyed as the other girls spoke their minds in evening group or went about camp chores, slicing and dicing veggies and meat for a stew or erecting a tarp to protect the picnic table from rain. When asked her opinion around the fire, she seemed afraid of her own voice. Her unfinished sentences trailed off and she cast her eyes down at the ground. But Joanna had paddled a lot of miles since then. She had worked hard on stepping up, and while the journey hadn't been easy, what happened next proved she was no longer that skittish fearful girl from the early days.

The girls circled up, while we stood some distance away.

"Look, dudes, we can make this work!" Joanna said. The others were leaning against their paddles or had slumped down on the damp mossy ground. Joanna's hands

seemed to weave a cat's cradle with invisible string as she explained the thing that needed to get done. The fire in her voice ignited everybody's interest. The plan was to tie each girl's wrists gently with bandannas. Yoked together in a human chain they would prepare supper. "*No way, man!*" everyone would have shouted a few weeks ago. But paddling white-capped lakes and camping on the shores of loon-haunted waters had worked a spell on these girls. But how much had they really changed in that time? Could they get a thing done without moaning and complaining, without the usual teenage resistance? I could tell from their voices that one positive thing was happening. Joanna had gotten everyone on board, even though they all knew that it was just another asinine initiative dreamt up by their instructors at the bone-weary end of a long day.

Eve tied the girls together wrist to wrist with their yellow bandannas. Standing beneath the hemlocks in an awkward circle, arms dangling, the girls were bewildered by this multi-limbed, many-headed creature they had become – something out of a mythological nightmare. How could they shuffle in unison like the centipede with so many minds having a say in every move they made? First they had to light a fire so I handed Joanna some birch bark and some cedar kindling from a cache of dry wood stored back in the woods. As the line slithered like some drunken anaconda toward the fire grate, rebellious mutterings flailed the air. Separately, the girls could have thrown the meal together in no time as they had done at so many camp sites. Lashed together, tempers flared and everyone barked out orders.

"Damn, how can I cut up the veggies while you're trying to light the fire?" the many headed creature cried out.

"Wait guys! Forget the veggies. We need cooking oil from the Duluth Pack!" another head yelled.

"This is crazy! I'm being yanked all over the place," said a third head.

"Ouch! You're squeezing me against a tree!" still another voice yelped.

Thinking collectively wasn't easy. Irritated voices endlessly debated procedure. It reminded me of a New England Town Meeting. We stood back in the evening shadows, resisting the temptation to rush to the rescue as skillets and spatulas clattered together, got dropped on the ground, and had to be picked up and the dirt brushed away. We covered our mouths to hide amused smiles as tempers flared when the fire sputtered out, the flames dying into a thin wisp of smoke.

We could hear Joanna directing, cajoling, shouting instructions with remarkable persistence. With the help of her never-say-die spirit, the cook fire crackled to life, as all those reaching and grasping appendages got the knack of working together. A cast iron skillet was pulled from the Duluth and oil dribbled in it so onions and peppers could be sautéed. Boneless chicken breasts were sliced lengthwise and added to the mix while refried beans simmered in another pan at the corner of the grate. "*Oh man, that smells so good!*" A voice exclaimed. "*I'm sooo hungry, I don't know if I can stand it!*" Another voice moaned. "*Look, you guys, I think the filling is done!*" A third voice piped in.

As we stood watching, Eve nudged me and whispered in my ear, "The grub's cooked. Should we untie their wrists?"

After Joel unknotted the yellow bandannas, the entire team crowded in front of the food laid out on the picnic table, forming a rowdy assembly line. The aroma of the spicy filling made everyone salivate. As each girl spooned ingredients into her tortilla shell, the trials of the day evaporated. Not one girl told us how much the thing with the bandannas sucked. Though tomorrow paddling on the lake they would joke about the cruelty of making them cook supper tethered together, tonight everyone could only think about filling their bellies.

Through the entire exercise we got to see the many faces of Joanna. When tempers flared she was the diplomat, when energy flagged she became a cheerleader, when the line floundered she was a general marshalling its lost sense of direction. The way she took hold of things you would have thought she was born to run the world. Circumstances had really put her in touch with her inner Churchill!

While wolfing down our thick tortillas, Eve threw out a simple declarative sentence, something real obvious, followed by a question.

“Most of you were pretty darn ticked off trying to cook supper all tied together. Anyone find themselves in some role they play at home?” The girls considered Eve’s words between bites.

“I always boss my little brother around when we help out at meals,” Darcy began. “I guess I was nagging Kim and Joanna when we were tied up, like they were my younger siblings.”

“All the squabbling we did tonight reminded me of all the fights my older sister has with my mother at the dinner table,” another girl said. “It made me feel like running and hiding to get away from the shouting.”

“As leader I had to play the grownup,” Joanna said. “It felt sort of weird being in charge, trying to get others to go along.”

We liked to kick around the all-purpose family metaphor, getting girls to think about troubled times with their folks, their siblings. Out here they did a lot of falling into the roles they played at home. Seeing the connections was vital. So after an initiative we simply backed up the reel and looked at it again in slow motion. This didn’t come natural to girls who had landed here due to a lack of reflection. Pondering their actions had been on the menu for these girls morning, noon and night. Making them aware of the root causes of their frustrations and the positive steps they could have taken, was what we tried to get at.

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From the upcoming book *The Summer Grievances*