

Bond Girls

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The red-headed PA has a wicker basket with all our cards. They

look like wedding invitations: thick square envelopes and black calligraphy on ecru paper. But he can't hand them out yet because Production decided to have us pre-record our post-meet-cute confessionals. The new camera crew is local and impatient, and they charge double after dark. So one by one we stand in the vestibule of the mansion and gush about what an amazing experience this is, and how nervous we are, and how lucky, and how when we stepped out of the limo we knew, we *knew* this was meant to be.

"Did you see how I almost tripped on my dress?" we say. "So embarrassing. My friends say I'm klutzy enough to be a YA heroine."

While the crew resets outside, the PA calls out our names. Leah? he says. Tiffany? We step forward: backs straight, eyes forward, hands outstretched. Sophie? Ellie? Anne-marie?

In the basket there are only two cards that anyone watching at home ever cares about: the Villain and the Winner. But we know there's also a Sweetheart card. The Bad Girl. The Drunk. This is how we'll be portrayed; this is how we will be expected to act. The PA tells us our roles have been specially selected according to our personality tests: Free Spirit. Waif. Mother, Maiden, Crone.

It's a lie and he knows we know it. We saw the interns draw them randomly out of a bowler hat. And if we were what they said we were already, we wouldn't need to be told.

"You may guess twice during the competition," he says. "If you are correct, that girl's card will now be yours. Do not discuss your guesses with any of the other girls; you may not collude," he says. "Do not discuss your guesses with James. Do not attempt to steal another girl's card. We know who you are at all times. Keep your cards hidden. Your limos are waiting outside."

On the way out, we pass James. He leans against the rose-covered pergola sipping his drink and muttering names, practicing.

Isabella, he says. Charlotte. Madison. Mariko. Some of the names are ours; some of them aren't.

Some of us wave at him, trying to be friendly. Most don't. A few practice tripping. One of them is really good. She stumbles onto her hands and knees then rolls into a summersault. She manages to make it look awkward and sexual all-at-once.

Most of the show is real. We use our real names and real ages. The house is real. The island is real. Real private planes take off and land at the airstrip down the road and Production calls them every day to ask for a schedule so they can plan when we'll be shooting in the real outdoors.

The closets are visited by real lizards and real spiders and real snakes and that is why our screening process included whether we suffered from allergic reactions and/or fear of insects and other animals.

The house menagerie has a real Komodo dragon but we're not allowed to visit it until the third group date.

James is, supposedly, real. We're not sure, because technically we haven't met him yet.

Most of us have, at one time or another, worked as a waitress, a massage therapist, an assistant, artist, bartender, elementary school teacher, or instructor of some form of vigorous physical activity, even if it was a really long time ago and we've since moved on to other professions.

We are all looking for love. We are all currently single. We've all signed legally binding non-disclosure agreements.

We all know how to load and shoot a gun. Though this is not required for participation, it is traditional.

They put all the girls with four syllable names in the last limo. As the cars circle around the driveway, it drives right on past us and down the hill towards the airstrip.

"I guess Production thought they'd take too long to film," Leah says.

The PAs tell us to kiss James on the left cheek when we meet

him. Don't hold eye contact for more than five seconds. He might give you a nickname. The nickname may sound like another girls' name. Don't worry, he knows exactly who you are. James doesn't talk much, they tell us. But don't worry. This doesn't mean he's not interested.

Once we're all inside again, James wanders from group to group with a PA trailing him with a boom mic. James recites the same five questions over and over again: How are you feeling? Where were you born? What do you do in your spare time? What are you looking for in a partner? Which is bigger: the Earth or the Sun?

After he's spoken to all of us, he wanders the room a second time, then a third. We're not allowed to ask our own questions. We're not allowed to fix him a drink. We're not allowed to mention the girls from previous years. We are allowed to touch him on the arm, lightly, above the elbow.

But not for more than five seconds.

All of our beds are lined up in one room, like a dormitory in an old British boarding school. We have curtains to pull closed for privacy. We each have a washbasin and a silver-plated vanity set on our dresser. They are all chipped and tarnished and feel warm to the touch, as if someone was just there using them before us.

We find old names carved into the rafters:

Vesper was here.

And Honey! XOXO

We find old dresses in the closets: sequin and lace and silk. There are books in the drawers: dog-eared and smudged. Lingerie and white cotton panties fill the laundry hampers. One of our mattresses has a hole in it, hastily sewn back together with fishing line. There's nothing in the mattress but stuffing and springs.

On the first group date, James takes us, all of us, to a dinner party where we are the only guests. The dining room looks over the sea and waiters in black jackets pass plates of shrimp and pineapple and bruschetta. We rotate every few minutes so that each of us may have a chance to sit next to James. Sometimes James forgets who

and where he is so he rotates too and then it is one of us sitting at the head of the table, her hand on our thigh and wiping wine from our lips with her thumb.

The date ends when James falls asleep in his chair. A PA shakes him gently by the shoulder. “Are you a stewardess?” he asks her. “I think I’d like to marry a stewardess. Someone in a uniform I would recognize when I came home at night.”

The PAs live in the house too, in another long, narrow bedroom with twin beds in neat rows. They are allowed to come into our rooms at night. They leave us notes and instructions for the morning. They suggest what we should wear and tell us if another girl has been talking about us during her confessional. They hint at who the villain is. She is sleeping close to us, closer than we think. Watch out.

They tell us James hopes we make it all the way to the end. They tell us he mentioned us by name specifically.

We are not allowed into the PAs’ room. Of course, we go in anyway. We leave them notes about how James thinks they are all very pretty. He’s forming a real connection. There is a trust there he has never felt before.

Each week, the villain writes a list of who will stay, and who will be sent home. The villain chooses who will go on each date. She can be friends with whomever she chooses, even if it is no one at all.

Every villain has had a different method of eliminating the competition. One year the girls were sent home alphabetically. Another year it was by age.

The PAs tell us the villain has investigated who is homesick, who is not. Who really cares for James, who doesn’t. Sometimes she created secret challenges we never knew we were competing in: who was the first to breakfast; the last to finish. Who used the most words ending in *y* in a 24 hour period. Who is the most afraid of sharks; the least afraid of commitment; who knows the most Hungarian swear words?

No one ever tries to guess who the villain is, even when it’s obvious, even when 2 seasons ago Jessica wore a felt goatee and

mustache on every date and tearfully told Natalie the night before her elimination to make the most of the last evening they would all have together.

Production doesn't seem to know why this happens. The only way to stay is to guess, and guess correctly. The PAs tell us they hope this year will be different. They're counting on us.

On the third group date, James takes us to the menagerie. He hands each of us an orange. He doesn't say anything else. Are we supposed to eat the orange? Feed it to the Komodo dragon? He stares at us as we wander beneath cacao trees and palms. There are coconut palms and date palms. Tiger palms. Fishtail palms. Jelly palms. Leah says she studied botany in college and points out the Sylvester, Montgomery, and the Dwarf Palmetto. She says the garden looks like it was designed by a fetishist. The Sago Palm isn't even a palm, she says.

At sunset, James gathers us in a circle and talks about the time his father gave him his grandfathers' compass and said it would help guide him to his soul mate. With her by his side, he would never be lost again.

Beneath the rustle of leaves, we can hear a PA move the cue cards one behind the other. We dig our nails into the meat of our hands until our eyes are shining.

The villain picks who will be eliminated each week; Production decides how. One Thursday, James takes Judy and Tiffany by helicopter to the base of a volcano. He tells them he doesn't see a real partnership forming with either of them. Everyone deserves someone who will solicit their affection rather than simply tolerate it, he says. Then he kisses each girl on the cheek, climbs back into the pilot seat, and flies away without them.

There are surprises and rule changes every year; Production thinks this will attract a newer and broader audience. When James returns in the helicopter, five new girls are with him. They speak with heavy European accents we barely understand. They wear wet-suits under their formal gowns. We never find out why. By morning,

they are gone and there are more limos waiting outside. New girls come in, one every hour all day long. They have manicured nails, sundresses, and wear natural makeup. At the next ceremony, half of them are sent home, so quickly that they forget their suitcases. We label them and stick them in the closet.

In the afternoons, James naps and we play cards with the PAs: poker, bridge, canasta, and spades. They tell us our food is better and that our health and dental insurance is more comprehensive. “You really have it all here,” they say.

They tell us that the last three members of the camera crew have quit again and tomorrow we’ll be asked by Production to carry our own hand-helds. The PAs can’t do it, the PAs say, because it’ll ruin the image to have all these beautiful women running around on a beautiful beach being trailed by pale-faced, pimply kids in black jeans and black shirts and black sneakers, like sharks. “We’re selling romance here.”

Judy and Tiffany return on a Tuesday morning. Their clothes are torn and their hair is filled with ash. Tiffany’s hands bleed from her nail beds. Neither girl has shoes. James takes them into the living room and sits between them on the couch. He listens as they tell him how they’ve thought about it, and they don’t think they could live with themselves if they gave up so quickly. James nods and nods.

We are only just beginning to learn how to film. We zoom in on the quiver of his cheek. They ask if they can come back and we circle the air with our hands.

“But I just don’t know,” he finally says, “if this is fair to the other girls.”

The villain knows what is going on at all times. She writes notes to the other girls, which the PAs give us: advice and instructions and the occasional threat. Her role is to sew chaos or order into the house, however she will. The PAs have to do exactly what she says, they tell us. She can tell them to steal a girl’s curling iron and make-up half an hour before a one-on-one, and they’re very sorry about it, but that’s the way the game works.

The PAs give us name tags to wear at all times. We leave them attached to our shirts which then go into a big pile and sometimes Leah is Sophie who is Amber who is Charlotte. Only our cameras remain our own. We hold them to our chests at breakfast, and while we sleep. We shower with one arm thrust behind the curtain. All of our pockets are filled with batteries.

James walks around the house with a gun slipped into the pocket of his trousers. It goes off one afternoon while he naps and leaves a hole and burn mark in the leather cushions. Later, Leah asks him to dance with her and she switches it out for a water pistol.

“I just don’t know,” he says to her, “if this is fair to the other girls.”

“I know, baby,” Leah says. “I know.”

There’s a hall in the back of the house where all the previous winners and villains have their portrait hanging on a wall. The PAs say it’s meant to inspire us: remember what you’re working towards. Remember that only two of you will reach the end.

Yet, Leah says, in each one, both girls stand together arm in arm. In each one, James is nowhere to be found. In each one, the girls are smiling.

James does not belong to us, though we may borrow him for a little while. We take him to the cliffs, to the waterfalls, to the meadow by the edge of the airstrip. We feed him names: names of girls who have already gone, who are safe, and he speaks them clearly at each elimination.

“Try it again,” Production says, but we have already returned to our bedrooms and there is no one left to film a tearful goodbye.

“What’s one more night?” James says.

Production corners us and tells us James would like to take us for a drive, or a sunset flight. We smile, clutch our hand-helds, and agree. We have already taken out the carburetors and spark plugs, disassembled the rotor hubs. As the engines sputter we even pat James consolingly on his back. “It wouldn’t have been fair,” we say, “to the other girls.”

There are so many of us now that we are given lumber and

nails. We knock down the back wall and hang sheetrock in the garden. One month all of our tools are donated by Home Depot. The next, they come from Lowes. Craftsman. Klein. Acme Home Supply. Sometimes we are sent boxes from viewers: screwdrivers and hacksaws. We find hand letters sewn into secret patches on new silk drapes flown in from Indiana.

“We’re watching you!” they all say. “We love you! You’re so lucky! I would just die to be in your shoes!”

On the 87th group date, we walk with James to an abandoned factory. It’s a picnic: red and white plaid blankets on the floor, white dishes, champagne. Leah takes long establishing shots of the empty rooms, of our names written in dust on the walls.

If there were music perhaps it would look just like a masquerade in some Czech castle. This is what Production wants, and we admit we see the appeal: James would rest his hand on our waist. He would eye each guest looking for the outline of guns or knives. At precisely 10:37 P.M. he would press his arm into a man’s neck and whisper a warning or secret or code.

Instead, James sits on the blankets and peels the stems off strawberries. The PAs surround us. They point to James and say we should go sit with him, put our arms around him, drink with him, bond with him. We need to do more to distinguish ourselves, to earn James’ trust and admiration. How else will he pick us?

We turn our cameras towards them. “Tell us,” we say. “How are you feeling? Where were you born? What do you do in your spare time? What are you looking for in a partner? Which is bigger: the Earth or the Sun?”

The PAs don’t blink, but they step back from the lights and booms. We feel their eyes on us in the dark and we remember the sound of their footsteps between our beds, the scratching of their pens on clipboards. We encircle James but do not approach. He is not ours, but we may borrow him for just a little while longer.

More girls arrive each day. Old girls, young girls. Girls with tattoos and scars. We take out the old suitcases and turn dresses into

hammocks and blankets. When we hear the limos, we rush down to meet them. We stare at them, blinking in the moonlight and ask if they remembered to bring fruit or rope.

They clutch their blank white cards and pencils. They ask us if we know who the villain is. They're supposed to guess the villain.

The house is real, we tell them. The island is real. Do not try to leave. We know exactly who you are.