

***UNDER WATER: A NOVEL WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION***

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Under Water* is a literary novel that follows the life experiences of Jess, a solo female scuba diving instructor living and working on Roatan, an island off the coast of Honduras. She learns of the death of her father on the same day she is responsible for the death of a diver under her care. She leaves the island shortly thereafter, only to return five years later at the disappearance of George, a friend and father figure. In the Encyclopedia of Utopian Literature, Mary Ellen Snodgrass defines utopia as a search for a "good place," or "a longing that haunts the unconscious . . . [a] desire for respite, a stopping place." Similarly, Jess' search for a "good place" structures her quest make a home for herself in Honduras even after experiences of trauma and loss.

The critical introduction to the novel includes two research articles in the field of nineteenth-century women's travel narratives and transnational utopian fiction. The first, "Nation as Utopia in Pauline Hopkins' novel *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self and The Colored American Magazine*," takes an intratextual approach to Hopkins' serial utopian novel in order to resituate African American serial texts within a larger network of national utopian thought. The second, "Science, Utopia, and Mary Kingsley's Narratives of Travel in Africa," expands upon imperialist considerations of nineteenth-century women's travel writing to show how Victorian women travel writers deployed utopian discourse as a means to negotiate their gendered subject position. The primary aim for both my critical and creative work is to contribute to ongoing efforts to show how women writers deployed utopian thought as a means to situate themselves within circulating national, scientific, or literary communities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: UNDER WATER, TRAVEL, AND UTOPIA

The conventions of both utopian and travel narratives have long been interconnected in the Western literary imagination. Real journeys and imagined ones are structured on a traveler's ability to depart from his/her place of origin, observe a new society, and return to report on what he/she has learned. This critical introduction considers how my own fictional travel narrative, *Under Water*, negotiates with the conventions of the travel genre through my creative exploration of the utopian aspects of travel. I include two scholarly articles in the field of nineteenth-century utopian studies as an origin story, of sorts: the first looks at how African American utopian novelist Pauline Hopkins' intratextually deployed utopian discourse as a means to imagine the future nation; the second examines Victorian travel writer Mary Kingsley's narratives of travel in Africa through the lens of the conventions of nineteenth-century utopian thought. In revealing both the past and present ties between travel narratives and utopian discourse, I emphasize how utopian thought can function as a means for women writers to work through complex discourses of personal identity, mobility, and nation.

The subjective, second-hand nature of knowledge and experience gained through travel has resulted in the travel narrative's reputation as the literature of Empire. As Debbie Lisle explains it, travel writing "reproduces a dominant Western civilization from which travel writers emerge to document other states, cultures, and peoples."<sup>1</sup> The continued popularity of travel writing has caused many to ask if it is possible not only to produce anti-colonial travel texts, but to move "beyond imperial eyes"<sup>2</sup> in our critical

approach to the genre. Justin Edwards finds the recent work by writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Caryl Phillips as representatives of an emergent form of travel writing, one which "resist[s] categorization"<sup>3</sup> by "transform[ing] the genre by inscribing travel, migration, mobility and displacement within a variety of experimental strategies to work through questions of movement and the politics of personal identity in relation to the complex interlocutions of space, place, and subjectivity."<sup>4</sup> Fictional and non-fictional traveler's tales by Western writers remain immensely popular (the recent movie-adaptation of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* is just one example), yet the unequal power dynamic between the privileged Western observer and the object, landscapes, and people described remains a point of contention in postcolonial critique.

Only recently have critics begun to explore how travel narratives engage with the idea of utopia as a means to both reinforce and subvert colonialist discourses. In *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Lisle claims that many contemporary travel writers present visions of a multi-cultural, globalized world that are inseparable from a nostalgia for colonized conditions. They invoke "dreams of a future multicultural utopia, and . . . nostalgic memories of innocent and uncorrupted destinations."<sup>5</sup> In Lisle's view, travel writing "reproduces the same discourses of difference that hold our prevailing view of the world in place,"<sup>6</sup> yet she does not circumscribe the potential of the genre to do more to acknowledge cultural difference in future iterations. In his study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's travelogues, Yaël Rachel Schlick criticized the binary nature of many critical responses to women's travel writing, noting that "critics writing about the travel experience of women have navigated between

conceiving of women's texts as an antidote to a male-dominated, imperialist genre (seeing a link between patriarchy and Empire), and viewing texts by women as lamentably reiterating all the politically and morally problematic gestures of the colonialist text."<sup>7</sup> Along the same lines, utopian discourse in travel writing questions this binary perspective by reminding us of the longstanding historical function of utopian literature as a vehicle for social and political critique. According to Schlick, the "utopian dimension" of travel writing has "[the] ability —due to the liminality of the traveler's situation and of the text she produces—to revise and reimagine the world, to question and destabilize, as Jacques Rancière puts it, what is 'generally known as reality.'"<sup>8</sup> If the traveler is by nature a liminal being, able to "question and destabilize," it follows that the utopian aspect of travel narratives grants the capacity to challenge dominant preconceptions about race, class, gender, and nation.

My methodology is grounded in recent critical inquiries into the broader applicability of utopian theory to women's writing. In *Utopia as Method*, Ruth Levitas reworks the idea of utopia as the "desire for a better way of living and being."<sup>9</sup> She writes:

This analytic rather than descriptive description reveals the utopian aspects of forms of cultural expression rather than creating a binary separation between utopia/non-utopia. It allows that utopia may be fragmentary, fleeting, elusive. It mirrors an existential quest which is figured in literature, music, drama and art . . . the utopian experiment disrupts the taken-for granted nature of the present. It creates a space in

which the reader may, temporarily, experience an alternative configuration of needs, wants, and satisfactions.<sup>10</sup>

This more inclusive approach to utopia can provide insight into nineteenth-century women's writing and how utopian thought provided a means of access into restricted realms such as the nation (Hopkins) and scientific communities (Kingsley). In *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, Lucy Sargisson has stressed that the concept of utopian desire is especially applicable to feminist utopianism, as women's utopian writing often does not fit within dominant definitions of utopian literature.<sup>11</sup> She rejects Sir Thomas More-derived definitions of utopianism which limit the scope of utopian writing to blueprint utopias or descriptions of ideal societies —approaches which concentrate solely on the form and content of a utopian narrative. Instead, she favors a function-based theoretical approach that views utopianism as "a space for speculation and critique."<sup>12</sup> In this reconceptualization of utopia, the emphasis is less on genre than "utopian dreaming,"<sup>13</sup> or utopian thought as it manifests in numerous "texts," including art, music, and dance. In much the same way, my own creative and critical work is invested in the idea that utopian desire has the potential to liberate women, at least partially, from the gendered restrictions placed on them by their societies.

To that end, the first article I include in this critical introduction concerns the editorial and textual production of nineteenth-century African American writer and editor Pauline Hopkins. I look specifically at the serial publication of *Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self* (1902-1903), a utopian novel that espoused Hopkins' vision of Africa as a past and future utopia. By resituating her text within the context of her textual



production as editor of *The Colored American Magazine*, I show how Hopkins' utopian ideology extended beyond the pages of the novel's serialized sections and into the surrounding texts and images. In this way, the entire text of *The Colored American Magazine* is reformulated as a space for "utopian dreaming." The placement of texts around installments of the utopian interludes of the novel, I will argue, illustrates Hopkins' critique of unequal social conditions for African Americans in the United States, as well as her hopes for a more egalitarian future. I intentionally bring together Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and Philip E. Wegner's "imaginary communities" to exemplify how utopian desire can function to intervene in circulating national and social discourses.

In my second article for this critical introduction, I highlight the utopian discourse of Victorian travel writer Mary Kingsley, particularly within the scope of her three narratives of travel in Africa: *Travels in West Africa* (1897), *West African Studies* (1899), and *The Story of West Africa* (1899). Shortly after the death of her parents, Kingsley began her career as a scientific travel writer. She made two solo expeditions into Western Africa in 1893 and 1895, with the aim of collecting "fish and fetish" — freshwater fish specimens and African cultural and spiritual relics. Her narratives of her travels were well-received, and she continues to be considered one of the most prominent figures in women's scientific travel writing of the nineteenth century. As I will argue, Kingsley is able to pursue her scientific ambitions by taking part in the circulating utopian quest for natural history knowledge, a practice that was accessible to women at this time. Her framing of Africa as a domestic garden —an Edenic space

suitable for female intervention —shows how Edenic mythology and utopian discourse could serve to negotiate the restrictions placed on Victorian women travelers at the time.

As an extension of my interest in women's utopian discourse, I integrate utopian themes into my own fictional travel narrative, *Under Water*. The novel opens with a tragic scuba diving accident on Roatan, an island off the coast of Honduras. Jess, a scuba diving instructor, receives an email informing her that her estranged father has died, shortly before she is to take customers out on a dive. During the dive, a downward current surprises her group of divers, and Jess is ultimately unable to save one of her divers from drowning. Much of the first part of the novel concerns Jess' struggle to come to terms with her feelings of remorse for the diver's death, as well as her grief over the loss of her father. After receiving an inheritance from her father's estate, Jess spends five years traveling, and she soon falls into a pattern of excessive alcohol, drugs, and meaningless sex. Her only friend during this time is George, a father figure who witnessed the accident and remains in touch from Roatan. When George disappears under mysterious circumstances, Jess returns to the island to find him, and ultimately makes the decision to make a home for herself on the island.

Like the utopian traveler, Jess' time in Honduras is characterized by her observations of the local culture and society. The setting emerges out of my own experiences working as a scuba diving instructor in Honduras in 2009 and 2010. At that time, then-President Zelaya was exiled from the country in a military coup, and curfews and social unrest reached even the islands. My novel creates a parallel between the growing unrest on the mainland and the steady dissolution of Jess' life on the island. As

Honduras becomes increasingly embroiled in a political crisis, Jess loses her job and finds herself in Roatan jail under suspicion for murder.

The mix of cultures on Roatan provides an ideal setting for my character's journey. As a former slaveholding British colony, Roatan is home to a diverse population, including the English-speaking descendants of emancipated African slaves and native Garifuna tribes, Spanish-speaking Hondurans, and a large contingent of European and North American expatriates. However, rather than invoking, as Lisle suggests, the idea of a cosmopolitan utopia, my narrative does not erase the racial tension between the black and Spanish-speaking Hondurans; neither does it conceal the economic disparity between Hondurans and the white expatriates also living on the island. Jess identifies with the struggles of the native islanders, but she is well aware of her privileged position as a white American. In one scene, she fantasizes about going into one of the Baptist churches in West End, but ultimately decides against it:

The more time she spent with the black islanders, though, the more self-conscious she became of her own whiteness, her own privilege. They didn't have the same opportunities. Even if they wanted to travel, for most of them, places like Thailand were little more than fantasies viewed through a television screen, as real as a *telenovela*. Yes, she could go into the church, but there were other walls than those of wood and glass (227).

Jess' liminal position a traveler makes her both observer and observed, outsider and insider to the cultural dynamics of the island.

Jess' conflicted personal and national identity is evident in her (usually unsuccessful) search for a "better way of living and of being" (Levitas). Without family ties to the United States, Jess does not have a "home" in the traditional sense. Her itinerant childhood, as well as the death of her father, have resulted in a loss of a cohesive point of origin. She reflects on her own liminal status in perhaps the most symbolic of places: on a plane: "She hated the time-filler conversations of people between places. Even the most banal questions flummoxed Jess. Where do you live? *Everywhere, nowhere*. What do you do? *Nothing*" (179). Her brief return to the United States illuminates her alienation from the middle-class American life represented by her father's neighborhood:

The houses' pretty exteriors were lies. Inside, the families could be arguing and harboring petty resentments. They could be going through divorces or abusing their children. Like an amusement park, the only thing that mattered was maintaining the façade of the American dream (161).

Jess' travels have marked her as different, no longer conforming to the expectations of a woman of her age and economic circumstances. On the plane, she avoids conversation with the woman next to her, because she believes she would not be understood:

If the old woman insisted on making conversation, Jess would lie. Lies made things simpler. Once Jess fulfilled a stereotype, the questioner would lose interest. She was a recent college grad taking a year off; she was a woman visiting distant relatives abroad; she was a businesswoman

on a week-long vacation. They didn't feel so much like lies as wishful thinking. Jess could see all the might-have-beens, the roads-less-traveled-by of her life. She couldn't suppress a certain amount of pride in the elaborateness of the lies she told, especially since no one, not once, had pointed a finger at her face to say *you are full of shit*. She secretly wanted them to, but they never did (180).

This scene calls attention to the pressure to conform to American preconceptions of behavior for someone of her age, race, and sex. Later, after returning to the island, Jess reflects that "Roatan was not a perfect place, but no place was perfect. Was it any better than the suburbs where her father had lived, where each house's exterior had been a lie?" (228). Ultimately, Roatan proves a better, albeit not a perfect, place for Jess; as a foreigner, there would be no expectation for her to conform to the rules of Honduran society, and she would experience more personal liberty than she would within the United States.

Another of the underlying themes in the novel is my critique of the exploitative practices of mass tourism. After the dive accident, Jess is treated for decompression sickness in a hyperbaric chamber. She observes that "on the curving metal ceiling overhead, someone had taped a tourist picture of Half Moon Bay. Blue water and yellow sand; the road —normally bustling with taxis and tourists —strangely devoid of people. The fantasy of paradise: solitary, empty" (90). As with the trope of the empty, exploitable landscape in Anglophone travel narratives of previous centuries, the myth of paradise persists in the tourist industry today. The tourist propaganda Jess sees, like

much of its kind, elides the exploitative social and political system upon which the traveler depends to maintain the illusion of paradise. Early in the novel, Jess recalls the feelings of her Italian colleagues about the American tourists who arrive at the island by cruise ship:

Americans came and took pictures that fulfilled their preconceptions of paradise, and when they were gone they left empty beer bottles and cigarette butts in the sand, to be raked away by sun-withered Hondurans who were barely making enough money to feed their families. Americans, the Italians told her, consumed everything, and left behind only trash. It was partly true, but Jess didn't hate the tourists the way Palo and his cohort did. She envied their happy, middle-class ignorance, the insularity of their families . . . she might have been one of those people, had circumstances in her life been different (71).

The Italians are critical of American tourists, even while they profit from the same unequal social system—namely, the underpaid labor of working class islanders. In another scene, Jess observes the resort staff raking the beach, erasing the presence of the previous day's tourists so the entire cycle could start again. Although she is cognizant of this disparity, Jess does not entirely adopt an anti-tourist stance. She envies the cruise-shippers' "happy, middle-class ignorance," an ignorance she had never able to experience due to her peripatetic childhood. Her alienation stems from her own status as out-of-place: she is neither tourist nor islander, and she identifies with aspects of both groups, even as she cannot fully belong to either.

If any utopia exists in my novel, it is an underwater one. In the opening scene of the novel, Jess goes diving, and she experiences a contentment and satisfaction not unlike Lucy Sargisson's idea of "utopian dreaming": "There was no sound beyond the crackling of the coral and the soft whoosh and bubble of her inhaled and exhaled breath. The peace of the dive settled into her skin, the way it always did" (58). There is an intentional irony in such scenes; each time Jess dives, I reinforce the concept that utopia cannot exist in the real world. Jess' underwater utopia is an impermanent one —she cannot remain there without dying. In the third part of the novel, Jess returns to diving after a five-year absence. I write: "[Jess] craved a witness. *See?* she wanted to shout. The terrible beauty of it! How had she forgotten?" (260). The underwater world is both "beautiful" and "terrible" —a place she desires to remain, but can never do so without losing herself completely.

Unlike the traditional plot of the travel or utopian narrative, there is no return: my protagonist remains in Honduras. The novel is structured like a dive, with each part representing a different stage: the initial descent, the dive (also known as actual bottom time), and the ascent. Her ascent at the end of the novel is a psychological one —she has finally come to terms with both the death of her father and Melissa Anderson, the diver she lost two years earlier. I close the novel on an optimistic note:

Her father's ashes swirled in front of her dive light. They diffused into the water around her and out into the water beyond the cliff. They swirled around her head, blown about by the bubbles from her regulator exhaust. Jess watched until she couldn't see them

any more, until they became part of the sea. Her computer beeped a one-minute warning. She let her light drift out over the abyss; she heard its siren call, and turned away. She made her way slowly up and back to the boat in water that did not resist her as she moved in the direction of home (314).

Jess' decision to release her father's ashes to the sea is symbolic one. She relinquishes her remorse for the death of the diver in the first scene of the novel. She forgives both her parents for their failures —her mother for her absence, and her father for his inability to forgive. Out of the ashes of her childhood, she creates a new life for herself on Roatan, with George as a substitute for the father she has lost. Roatan is not a utopia; even so, Jess' utopian desire and quest to make a place for herself in the world reflect my own critical engagement with what it means to be a solo woman traveler in the twenty-first century.

### Endnotes

1. Lisle, *Global Politics*, 3.
2. See Lindsay, "Beyond Imperial Eyes."
3. Edwards, *Mobility at Large*, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, 207
6. *Ibid.*, 277
7. Schlick, *Feminism and the Politics of Travel*, 4.
8. *Ibid.*, 3
9. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 9
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 10
12. Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.



## 2. NATION AS UTOPIA IN PAULINE HOPKINS' *OF ONE BLOOD; OR, THE HIDDEN SELF AND THE COLORED AMERICAN MAGAZINE*

Nation-building has always been a utopian project. Philip E. Wegner has highlighted the connection between "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson) and the "imaginary communities" of nation states, in that utopian narratives often provide imaginative spaces for mapping out community identities and working through the various social, political, and cultural crises of their time.<sup>1</sup> African American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries similarly created black nationalist or pan-Africanist utopias in direct response to the systematic rise in racial violence and African American social and political inequality. Recent work by M. Giulia Fabi and others has called attention to the important contribution of African American utopian writers such as Sutton E. Griggs, Frances E.W. Harper, and Edward A. Johnson to the genre.<sup>2</sup> Yet the expression of utopian thought, I would argue, was not limited to the utopian novel or narrative utopia. African American serial publications also created collaborative spaces for critiquing unequal social conditions and suggesting possible avenues of reform. This study re-examines Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins' utopian novel, *Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self* within its serial context as a means to provide further insight into how Hopkins and the other writers of the *Colored American Magazine* negotiated adverse conditions for African Americans in the United States by presenting a communal vision for the future nation. Hopkins served as editor of the magazine from 1900 to 1904, and her editorial choices reveal a conscious effort to guide reform efforts

toward a universally Christian, post-racial America.<sup>3</sup> Through numerous texts (including her own), Hopkins positions Africa as the point of origin of humanity, while simultaneously prophesying Africa's return to global prominence. Hopkins thus reimagines Africa as a past and future utopian landscape, an ideological nexus for African American renewal.

Only recently have scholars begun to examine the complex relationship between African American serial texts and nation-building. Jean Lee Cole found that the serial publication of antebellum African American fictional texts "enhance[d] their power," since readers "imagine[d] connections between themselves and the events about which they [were] reading—as well as the connections between themselves and other readers."<sup>4</sup> It follows that the writers and editors of nineteenth-century African American serial texts were equally as engaged in the process of nation-building as their white counterparts, albeit in ways circumscribed by their minority status. In her analysis of Martin Delany's serially-published utopian novel *Blake: Or, the Huts of America*, Katy Chiles uses an intratextual approach that considers nineteenth-century African American writers' position as "both part of but simultaneously apart from the unstable entities of nations and other texts."<sup>5</sup> In this way, the intratextual, or the "friction, overlay, and conversations among texts within a text,"<sup>6</sup> echoes the discursive relationship between African American texts, authors, and circulating national discourses. Such studies reiterate the need to continue to explore how serial texts converge (or diverge) in response to dominant cultural and national discourses. That being said, scholars have yet to conduct a detailed study of Hopkins' fictional work within the context of the *Colored*

*American Magazine*. Even those scholars who do address the serial context focus almost exclusively on texts authored by Hopkins, without considering her work as embedded within a broader network of discourses and ideas.

For this reason, we might broaden the scope of our inquiry by considering Hopkins' editorial work itself as a kind of textual production. As Victor Sage asserts, "to edit is to frame a text. To frame a text is to produce a hierarchy of discourses, in which other discourses can be framed."<sup>7</sup> As editor, Hopkins would have been influential in the placement and selection of texts placed before and after installments of her serial novels. Hopkins' textual pairings demonstrate her awareness of the demands of her readership, as well as her desire to improve the quality of life for African Americans in the United States. The efforts of the Colored Cooperative Publishing Company were, indeed, "cooperative": publication depended on reader subscriptions, and readers were influential in determining the *Colored American Magazine's* content. According to Hazel Carby, "Readers were asked to become members by investing five dollars, and contributors were made members through a system that gave them a cash evaluation of their articles which equated to certificates of deposit."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Hopkins was known to alter many of the texts appearing in the magazine to suit her political aims; as Ira Dworkin explains, Hopkins' "editorial liberties, such as her adoption of the collective first-person plural point of view, inflect meaning . . . [they] bear the mark of her unique hand and must be considered a complicated form of authorship."<sup>9</sup> Writing under the pseudonyms Sarah A. Allen and J. Shirley Shadrach also gave Hopkins the ability to surreptitiously increase her contribution to the magazine.<sup>10</sup> Hopkins' control over the

magazine's content cannot be underestimated; indeed, her refusal to concede to the demands of newly-appointed editor John C. Freund has been pinpointed as the cause of her departure from the magazine in 1904.<sup>11</sup>

One of Hopkins' primary editorial strategies for imagining the future role of African Americans in the nation involved positioning Africa as both the birthplace of humanity and a future world power. Throughout her four-year run as editor, the number of articles on Africa steadily increased, with most of the Africa-themed content appearing in the first half of each issue, at the literal and symbolic "front" of the debate about the importance of Africa to African Americans. The eleven installments of *Of One Blood* were published in the *Colored American Magazine* between November 1902 and November 1903, and during that time, Africa-themed content often was placed either immediately before or immediately after installments of the novel (as was the case for the third, fourth, sixth, and eleventh installments). Hopkins' interest in Africa peaked in 1905, after her less-than-amicable departure from the magazine. She published *A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race and the Possibility of Restoration by its Descendants*, a political pamphlet which deployed a mixture of scientific, political, and biblical rhetoric to argue for the impending "restoration" of a once-great Ethiopian civilization.

The first step in this process of restoration involved overwriting notions of racial difference through depictions of Africa's former glory. Hopkins based these depictions on her research into ancient African civilizations; much of the second half of *Of One Blood* is occupied with Reuel Briggs' quest to find the ancient African city of Meroe, a

city supposedly founded by the descendants of Noah (the title and theme of *Of One Blood* are a direct reference to Acts 17:26: "Of one blood have I made all races of men"). Briggs, a Harvard college professor who "passes" as white, embarks on an archaeological expedition to Africa after a villainous colleague threatens to disclose his black heritage. The plot—a mix of romance, adventure, and utopian genre conventions—culminates in Briggs' accidental discovery of Telassar, an African utopia pre-dating Western civilization. Shortly thereafter, in a twist on the typical miscegenation plot, Briggs learns of his blood relation to his wife (she is revealed to be his sister). The novel's incest plot exposes the repercussions of enforcing racial distinctions (namely, rape and incest, as both Briggs and Lusk are children of a female slave and a male slave owner). The discovery of Telassar precludes such damaging unions, as the need for secrecy (and the source of disastrous miscommunication) would be eradicated in the new world order. Prior to his separation from the expedition party, Briggs consults expedition leader Professor Stone, who states (voicing Hopkins' views on the subject), "Of this we are sure—all records of history, sacred and profane, unite in placing the Ethiopian as the primal race."<sup>12</sup> According to Hazel Carby, "This story of origins is used by Hopkins to elaborate the Afro-American literary convention of the search for and the discovery of family, a metaphor for the black diaspora...the narrative asserts that contemporary black Americans are Ethiopians."<sup>13</sup> In this framing, Africa becomes a starting point for a post-racial America, one in which the black family unit is restored and the notion of racial impurity (the "One-Drop Rule") is made irrelevant.

Hopkins' placement of other texts around installments of the novel illustrates her desire to address the problem of racial inequality in America by reinterpreting Africa's past. In the January issue of the magazine, Howard University Professor Kelley Miller laments that "the races are growing farther and farther apart."<sup>14</sup> After pointing out the unequal distribution of power between whites and blacks in America, Miller ultimately argues for black segregation and self-sufficiency. Even so, Miller's text is laden with anxiety about "illicit intercourse"<sup>15</sup> and the problem of "composite progeny"<sup>16</sup> which make it difficult to distinguish between races. In the installment of *Of One Blood* that precedes Miller's text, Briggs departs for Africa. If Miller's text presents the "problem" of miscegenation, Briggs' subsequent discovery of Telassar functions as Hopkins' proposed solution.

In order to bring about this vision of a post-racial America, Hopkins repeatedly emphasizes the unsuitability of present-day Africa as a utopia. Throughout its run, the publishers of the *Colored American Magazine* were not subtle in their assertions that change needed to take place within the borders of the United States as opposed to exporting the "race problem" overseas. Several pages before the first chapters of the novel, Hopkins herself writes in an editorial, "The Freedman is a part and parcel of the government. He cannot be deported. He will not seek the malaria of Africa of his own accord."<sup>17</sup> After her departure from the magazine, Hopkins made her stance abundantly clear: "Are we obliged to emigrate to Africa ... ?" she asks. "No. Friendly intercourse and mutual aid and comfort are all that are necessary at the present time."<sup>18</sup> Hopkins' descriptions of Tripoli are typical of the racialized thinking of her time; after his arrival,

for example, Briggs is disappointed by the "barbarism and idolatry" he finds there. He visits a "dirty Arab town" where he encounters "a pile of old ruins that promised nothing of interest to him after all."<sup>19</sup> With such images, Hopkins pairs Arab culture and crumbling ruins, such that present-day Africa becomes a dystopian landscape, the site of a once-great African civilization now unsuitable to African American emigration due to racial decline and regression to a "barbaric state."<sup>20</sup>

Rather than suggest African Americans emigrate to Africa, therefore, Hopkins turns the reader's gaze away from Africa's present and towards its idyllic past. The November 1902 issue (which includes the first installment of *Of One Blood*), opens with a travel narrative by Nicholas H. Campbell, an African American naval officer reporting on his visit to "Bizerta" (Bizerte), a Tunisian city once part of the Roman Empire. Immediately following the table of contents is one of Campbell's travel photographs. Several people in local attire are overshadowed by a large stone wall, and the rounded doorway obscures their faces and bodies [Fig. 1]. The wall dominates the scene; the gaze of the spectator is drawn away from the denizens of the market and toward the arching doorway of the (presumably) ancient wall. As the first image the reader would see, the image of the Bazaar sends the reader's gaze from present to past. In the accompanying text, Campbell writes that he went to Tunisia with the intent to peruse the "beauty and *ancient* grandeur of the African cities along the Mediterranean coast" [emphasis added]<sup>21</sup> Hopkins uses similar rhetoric when describing Briggs' initial view of Tripoli; she writes that "it is the eternal enchantment of the cities of the Orient seen at a distance; but, alas! set foot within them, the illusion vanishes and disgust seizes you. Like beautiful bodies

they have the appearance of life, but within the worm of decay and death eats ceaselessly."<sup>22</sup> Hopkins' narrative perspective, as with Campbell's view of the Bazaar, is from afar, occluding the culture and inhabitants of real-world Africa.



"ALONG THESE STREETS WERE THE SHOPS AND BAZAARS."  
*See page 7.*

**Figure 1. "Along These Streets were the Shops and Bazaars." *The Colored American Magazine*, 1.**

However, Hopkins' disdain for contemporaneous social conditions in Africa does not imply that she had lost hope in Africa's utopian potential. A. Kirkland Soga's four-part report on Africa, "Ethiopians in the Twentieth Century," appears in close proximity to the Telassarian interludes of *Of One Blood* (in three out of four issues, immediately preceding or following an installment of the novel). In his report, Soga assesses South Africa's ongoing struggle for independence from British Rule and floats the possibility of an "imperium in imperio"<sup>23</sup> within which South African blacks might manage their



own affairs. Telassar becomes the fictional embodiment of what this black nation — modeled on ancient African societies — might one day become. In juxtaposing Soga's texts with installments of *Of One Blood*, Hopkins situates Africa as a nascent utopia, a prospective site of pan-African racial pride. She would later elaborate on this point in her *Primer*, in which she states that Ethiopia would grow in prominence, given "the establishment of the Liberian Republic, the Anglo-Boer war in South Africa and the rapid opening up of the Continent of Africa by civilized powers during the nineteenth century and the rapid intellectual improvement of Africans and their descendants in all parts of the world." She goes on to state, "What is the obligation of the descendent of Africans in America? —To help forward the time of restoration."<sup>24</sup> This "restoration" is primarily psychological, as a gradual improvement in the conditions of life in Africa would change the perspective of her readers in such a way that a physical relocation would be unnecessary.

The backwards-looking gaze of both Hopkins and the other writers of the *Colored American Magazine* reflects an idealization of the past that is at once historical and spiritual. In her choice to structure *Of One Blood* along biblical —rather than teleological —lines, Hopkins moves away from the dominant "onward and upward" view of history to make room for the idea of postlapsarian redemption or return. In his survey of African American novels and the Eden trope, J. Lee Greene found that the rise of the African American novel resulted in new permutations of the Eden myth. He argues, "Anglo-Americans from the colonial period onward appropriated, transformed, and conflated passages from the Judeo-Christian Bible to justify their exclusion of

Africans and descendants of Africans from the American family."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, African American novelists "treated their race's liminal status and reacted to the sociopolitical and literary manifestation of Anglo-America's Eden trope in ways that significantly shaped the novel's techniques during its first hundred years."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Hopkins modifies the Eden trope as a means to depart from the primitivist rhetoric that had circulated since the early days of imperialist expansion to Africa, i.e., "the imagined idea of Africa as old, backwards, or fallen."<sup>27</sup> While Hopkins certainly depicts present-day Africa as existing in a "fallen" state, she departs from the stereotype in her formulation of Telassar, an African Eden that both ancient and modern, natural and "civilized."

Hopkins' intratextual merging of the Edenic and the ancient leaves open the possibility for African Americans and African-descended people to not only meet, but supersede Western ideals of civilization. For example, Telassar has characteristics of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian societies (then considered the apex of pre-Christian civilization), but it is also a verdant paradise. After taking a trip through the outskirts of the city, Briggs discovers scenery "at variance with the European idea respecting Central Africa, which brands these regions as howling wildernesses or an uninhabitable country. He found the landscape most beautiful..."<sup>28</sup> The natural landscape is Edenic, but the royal palace is "dome-shaped and of white marble, surrounded by fluted columns, and fronted by courts where fountains dashed their spray to the blue sky"<sup>29</sup> The presence of columns and marble calls to mind Greek and Roman architecture, and later in the narrative, Briggs comes across a giant statue of Ramses the Great, as well as a sphinx of "incomparable magnificence."<sup>30</sup> Telassar even features such technological advancements

as a self-raising platform or elevator: "Instantly, he felt a gliding motion as if the solid earth were slipping from beneath his feet . . . he found himself on a raised platform the center of a vast auditorium, crowded with humanity"<sup>31</sup> In such scenes, Telassar represents the future civilization possible through collective action. This imagined utopia would meet all the earmarks of Western progress, namely, art, science, education, and wealth.

Hopkins' reinforces this postlapsarian view of history with her placement of texts betwixt-and-between installments of the novel. Following Nicholas H. Campbell's travel narrative in the November 1902 issue is Charles W. Hall's "The Purple Confessions of a Christian Martyr," the fictionalized history of Cyprian, a bishop in Carthage martyred for his Christian beliefs in 258 A.D. Like Campbell, Hall invites nostalgia for ancient Carthage. He describes the presence of art, luxury, commerce, and elaborate architecture; the ancient city is composed of "walls embellished with exquisite frescoes and priceless mosaics . . . [that] told of the almost regal wealth and prominence."<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of the narrative, Cyprian is "looking forth across his splendid gardens to the walls and port of the great metropolis."<sup>33</sup> In the sixth installment *Of One Blood*, Edenic gardens and Roman architecture are likewise absorbed into one gaze; when Briggs first wakes up in Telassar's royal palace, he opens a door to "a terrace with a garden at its foot—a garden where a marvelous profusion of flowers and foliage ran riot amid sparkling fountains and gleaming statuary"<sup>34</sup> In mixing the markers of civilization and the Eden trope across multiple texts, Hopkins strategically merges past and future Africa in the minds of her readers and calls for Africa's "return."

While the presumption of a Christian readership in the *Colored American Magazine* was not an uncommon editorial practice at this time, Hopkins' intratextual deployment of Christian rhetoric shows a utopian strategy at work. For example, the December 1902 issue of the *Colored American Magazine* features numerous articles that link the rise of African power and prestige to the prophetic return of Christ. This Christmas-themed issue also includes another fictionalized history by Charles W. Hall, "The First Christmas Birthday," a retelling of the journey of Mary and Joseph through Egypt after the birth of Christ. In Hall's narrative, Mary and Joseph flee the forces of Herod, a Roman king, by seeking refuge in the desert of Egypt. There are numerous images to visually re-enact this journey for the *Colored American Magazine's* readers, such as one from a series of religious paintings by Luc Olivier Merson [Fig. 2]. In the image, Mary is cradled by the paws of the sphinx in an inversion of the Madonna-and-child trope. The sphinx dominates the left side of the image, and only the faces of Mary and the Sphinx are visible. On the right half of the painting, the faces of Joseph and the infant Jesus are obscured by their coverings. The viewer's gaze is drawn to the right, where Egypt (in the form of a sphinx) becomes the maternal archetype, mother to "the mother" of Christianity. In both text and image, Africa is tied to the birth of Christianity; Africa becomes the lost Eden that would return to prominence with the return of Christ.



**Figure 2. "They Were Probably Far in the Desert when Herod's Soldiers Entered Bethlehem." Reprint of "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" by Luc Olivier Merson, 1880. *The Colored American Magazine*, 88.**

Telassar bridges the gap between the biblical past and the utopian future of Africa:

Briggs' return to Telassar parallels the return of Christ prophesied in the New Testament, and Reuel ("royal") Briggs, now given the Telassarian name of Ergamenes, proves to be the long lost king whose arrival precedes the restoration of African-descended people to power. His guide, Ai, asks: "How believe you, Ergamenes?" 'In Jesus Christ, the Son of God,' replied Reuel solemnly. 'O Ergamenes, your belief shall be ours; we have no will but yours. Deign to teach your subjects.'<sup>35</sup> This noticeably facile conversion is reflective of Hopkins' confidence in Christianity as a unifying force for pan-African reform efforts.

Hopkins further indicates the necessity of universal Christianity in her textual pairing of the "civilizing mission" to Africa and Telassar. Just a few pages from the fourth installment of *Of One Blood*, in which Reuel Briggs expresses his disappointment with the ruins and racial diversity in Tripoli, Hopkins places Albreta Moore Smith's "A Plea for Missionary Work and Workers," a missive in support of conversion efforts in

Africa. Smith proclaims that "in that glorious country of our fore-parents, the land of gold and precious gems, the land of jungles and deserts, are thousands and thousands of souls languishing in darkness; waiting for the light of God to come."<sup>36</sup> Her call for Christian missionary efforts echoes Briggs' disillusionment with the "barbaric state" of Tripoli. The rhetoric of the civilizing mission reinforces Hopkins' belief in the potential of a Christian Africa to improve conditions not only for Africans, but for all African-descended people. The return to an Edenic Africa could only become possible through conversion, a conversion that would have to begin within the borders of the United States, and more locally, within the hearts and minds of her readers.

Interestingly, Hopkins chooses to leave her utopia symbolically incomplete at the end of the novel's final installment. After attempting to poison her villainous second husband, who also happens to be her brother, Dianthe Lusk is forced to drink the poison herself, dying before Briggs' return (after only recently discovering he was not dead as she had been told). On her deathbed, she has a prophetic vision of the future rise of Ethiopia. She hears music which increases in volume to a crescendo: "The chant of thousands of voices swelling in rich, majestic choral tones, joined in the thundering crash. It was the welcome of ancient Ethiopia to her dying daughter of the royal line." She later asks, "Do you not hear them?...Hasten, O hasten! Still they have a long mile to traverse. Oh, hasten! They call me home."<sup>37</sup> The call to Africa is tied to the revelation of shared origins, both in the sense of Briggs' family ties and all people of African descent. Even so, while the idealized African past is symbolically moving towards African Americans in the United States, Dianthe Lusk does not live to see its arrival. Hopkins

makes the reader responsible for bringing ancient Ethiopia's restoration to fruition. In the final scene of *Of One Blood*, Briggs (after learning of Lusk's death), returns to Telassar to marry Queen Candace, bringing full circle the "return" of the Christ-like figure. Yet despite this seemingly "happy" ending, not all is well at the end of the novel. Hopkins writes that "Reuel Briggs returned to the Hidden City with his faithful subjects...but the shadows of great sins darken his life, and the memory of past joys is ever with him. He views, too, with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land. 'Where will it stop?' he sadly questions. 'What will the end be?' But none save Omnipotence can solve the problem."<sup>38</sup> Briggs' "shadow" is the same shadow that oppresses Hopkins' African American readers —the history of slavery in the United States. "Omnipotence" is both God and reader, the unseen observers of the narrative. Through this and the other texts placed around installments of the novel, Hopkins implies that only the Christian reader, allied with God, can save Africa from the forces of colonization and improve conditions of life for African Americans in the United States.

In this fashion, Hopkins' creative and editorial textual production shows her investment in circulating utopian national discourses. In revising the African American origin story, she invokes both biblical prophecy and western notions of progress to suggest a symbolic return to a glorious African past. Her strategic placement of texts shows her participation in a collective vision of a Christian America, one in which all are "of one blood." Africa lies at the center of this vision —the starting point and future nexus for racial uplift efforts. Although impractical at best, Hopkins' utopian dreaming

reveals much about the participation of African American serial publications in imagining the future role of African Americans in both the nation and the world. Reading her novel as engaged with surrounding texts and national discourses shows how African American periodicals such as the *Colored American Magazine* were deeply invested in the utopian project of imagining the nation as they believed it could—or should—become.

### Endnotes

1. See Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*.
2. See Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*.
3. Here, I invoke Melissa Asher Daniels' definition of "post-racial," which implies "a psychological and geographical state wherein American racial hierarchies no longer oppress black people." Daniels, "The Limits of Literary Realism," 175 n. 3.
4. Cole, "Mobility and Resistance," 66.
5. Chiles, "Within and Without Raced Nations," 330.
6. *Ibid.*, 325. She refers here to Martin Delany's famous proclamation that African Americans in the United States existed as a "nation within a nation," (qtd. 324).
7. Sage, "The Author, the Editor, and the Fissured Text," 15.
8. Carby, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, xxxiii.
9. Dworkin, *Daughter of the Revolution*, xxxix.
10. Wallinger. *Pauline E. Hopkins*, 60.
11. Dworkin, *Daughter of the Revolution*, xxxi.
12. *The Colored American Magazine*, 270.
13. Carby, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, xlv.
14. *The Colored American Magazine*, 202.
15. *Ibid.*, 204.
16. *Ibid.*, 201.
17. *Ibid.*, 22.
18. Hopkins, *A Primer of Facts*, 352.
19. *The Colored American Magazine*, 339.
20. *Ibid.*, 266. For more on Hopkins' problematic invocation of racial science, see Martin Japtok, "Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood*, Africa, and the 'Darwinist Trap.'"
21. *The Colored American Magazine*, 3.
22. *Ibid.*, 265.
23. This concept of a "state within a state" was common to black nationalist thought. Here, Soga may be referencing Sutton E. Griggs' 1899 utopian novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, which imagined an independent black nation located near Waco, Texas (qtd. in *The Colored American Magazine*, 483).
24. Hopkins, *A Primer of Facts*, 344.
25. Greene, *Blacks in Eden*, 3-4.



26. Ibid., 6.
27. Deckard, *Paradise Discourse*, 79.
28. *The Colored American Magazine*, 493.
29. Ibid., 425.
30. Ibid., 427.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 11.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 425.
35. Ibid., 432.
36. Smith, "A Plea for Missionary Work," 277.
37. *The Colored American Magazine*, 805.
38. Ibid., 807.

### 3. SCIENCE, UTOPIA, AND MARY KINGSLEY'S NARRATIVES OF TRAVEL IN AFRICA

*"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail."*

—Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891

"The unknown lands are almost all discovered," wrote Edward Alexander Powell in his 1912 travel narrative, *The Last Frontier: The White Man's War for Civilization in Africa*. "The earth has but one more great prize with which to lure the avaricious and the adventurous: Africa —mysterious, opulent, alluring —beckons and calls."<sup>1</sup> To a Victorian scientific explorer of the late nineteenth-century, the interior of Africa was the last frontier of European exploration, one that could become either utopia or dystopia — a site of infinite possibility or the heart of darkness. Yet Africa was not solely the purview of the masculine adventurer/hero implied in Powell's enthusiastic call to Africa. Victorian women travelers such as Mary Henrietta Kingsley also contributed to the ongoing imperial and scientific project to taxonomize Africa's plants, animals, and people. Kingsley made two solo expeditions from England to the Western African region now known as Gabon in 1893 and 1895. Under the auspices of being a trader, she collected freshwater fish specimens and African cultural and spiritual relics, known as "fetish." Prior to Kingsley's expeditions, only a few women had managed to gain access

to scientific societies, as nearly all fields of scientific inquiry were dominated by men. One exception was natural history collecting—a widespread, utopian movement whose ultimate goal was to understand the natural world, if only in terms of its status as "inexhaustible, bountiful, [and] endlessly variable."<sup>2</sup> This project expands upon our understanding of Kingsley's writings on Africa to consider how women scientific explorers and writers deployed circulating utopian discourses as a means to negotiate their gendered subject position as travelers, writers, and explorers.

By the final decades of the nineteenth-century, the popularity of the literature of the Western frontier extended to Africa, where disease and difficult terrain left many areas unmapped by European empires. Reports of attempts to find the elusive source of the Nile and other African waterways, many ending in tragedy, fascinated a transatlantic reading public. American journalist Henry Morton Stanley's well-publicized search for the "lost" Dr. David Livingstone in Central Africa did much to popularize the figure of the heroic explorer in Africa. As Tim Youngs writes, "Stanley's narratives are mostly self-centered, patterned around the adventurous hero, favored by divine providence, overcoming geographical and human obstacles to reach his goal."<sup>3</sup> Stanley was the prototypical American Adam, a narrative convention that flourished in nineteenth-century writings on Africa. As R.W.B. Lewis famously wrote in 1955, the American Adam was

individual and emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry,  
untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race . . .  
It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in

praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him.<sup>4</sup>

Victorian scientific explorers and writers, both male and female, were influenced by the Adamic convention, as imperial desire to control the wilderness could easily be aligned with Biblical prerogatives. Adam was the prototype of the imperial taxonomizer, the first man tasked with "naming" the beasts and the fowl: "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was its name."<sup>5</sup> Jean Delimeau has traced the trans-historical influence of Edenic mythology in Western culture, finding that "one of the sources of the happiness of Adam and Eve in the earthly paradise was that they had complete control of nature and received the docile obedience of all the animals."<sup>6</sup> The taxonomizing impulse of Victorian travel writing about Africa was inextricable from the Adamic persona; Victorian naturalists and explorers were on a quest to name (or, more accurately, re-name) locations and plant and animal species—to situate themselves in the rhetorical position of Adam in the garden of Eden.

Kingsley was well aware of the ubiquitousness of the Adamic authorial identity in narratives of travel in Africa. She was well read in the genre, and according to Katherine Frank, she favored the work of explorers Paul Belloni Du Caillu, and Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza. In her biography of Kingsley, Frank writes that "what sparked

Mary's hero worship of Du Chaillu and Brazza . . . was not their sensational adventures with gorillas or pygmies or their races with competing explorers, but rather their fearless passage through what she liked to call 'choice spots' in West Africa —regions of particular danger that required special gifts of strength of mind and body, or as she put it, 'pluck, perseverance, and tact.'"<sup>7</sup> Kingsley's narratives deploy all three of these characteristics, but it was not always so easy for a Victorian woman claim these traits. Although Kingsley was one of the few women travel writers of her time who managed to avoid public scorn, this may be partly attributable to her martyr-like death at age 38 — she died of typhus while volunteering as a nurse in the Boer War. Most women who traveled to Africa did so as missionaries or wives; those who traveled alone risked public humiliation and the association with the grotesque that came of transgressing gender lines.

Kingsley's narratives therefore reflect the need to both conform to the conventions of the travel genre and address the spectacle created by her white female body in Africa. Much critical work has been done to unearth the "multi-voiced"<sup>8</sup> aspects of Kingsley's narration, or the delicate work of conforming to, even while subverting, the expectations of gender and empire.<sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Pratt argues that Kingsley uses a "masterful comic irreverence," in that her narrative gaze "mocks the self-importance and possessiveness of her male counterparts . . . Kingsley's irony constitutes her own form of mastery, deployed in a swampy world of her own that the explorer-men have not seen and do not want."<sup>10</sup> Alison Blunt has critiqued Pratt for the reductionism of limiting Kingsley's mastery to the swamps of Africa. She writes that such spatial limitations are

incompatible with "the ideals and day-to-day practice of imperial rule, the ambivalence of individuals within such discourses and strategies of control, and the need to avoid making exaggerated claims from isolated passages of text that are informed by perceptions of the individualization of subjectivity."<sup>11</sup> Kingsley's discourse of mastery shows how the manipulation of the convention of the Adamic hero could serve to simultaneously intervene into masculine narrative territory and draw attention to the anomaly of her white female body in Africa.

As a woman traveler, Kingsley could not fully adopt the Adamic persona without overstepping the gendered sensibilities of her readers —she had to be both Adamic explorer and proper Victorian lady. Lila Marz Harper calls this Kingsley's "balancing act," in that she "both praises science and the domestic role of women even as she undermines it."<sup>12</sup> Like the Adamic hero, Kingsley's narratives reinforce the importance of the solitary journey; unlike her predecessors, she attributes her success to her femininity. In her final published work, *The Story of West Africa*, Kingsley recounts the failed expeditions of explorers such as Mungo Park, noting that "to what one should attribute the long run of failure in the expeditions which followed Mungo Park's first, it would be difficult to say, unless it was that they were expeditions, instead of lone wanderers. They were not quite strong enough to fight their way through so warlike a district as the West Sudan, yet they were strong enough to frighten the natives and raise their suspicions."<sup>13</sup> Rather than using violence to gain passage through the African jungle, Kingsley succeeds because her femininity makes her less of a threat. A single white woman could, she argued, go relatively unnoticed along the West African trade routes.

Kingsley's whiteness and femininity offer her a measure of protection that would be impossible for the conventional Adamic hero. She draws attention to her close calls with death, and the heroism inherent in braving disease and other dangers in the African jungle. It is her feminine attire, however, that affords her protection amid the jungle's many dangers. In one notorious passage, Kingsley recounts falling into an animal trap, a pit full of spikes. "It is at these times you realize the blessing of a good thick skirt," she recounts. "Had I paid heed to the advice of many people in England, who ought to have known better, and did not do it themselves, and adopted masculine garments, I should have been spiked to the bone, and done for."<sup>14</sup> Her clothing (not to mention her humor) protects her from spikes both literal and metaphorical. Throughout her life, Kingsley was careful to maintain her public image as a demure, proper lady. As Harper explains, "Kingsley attempted to diffuse a possible backlash against her explorer role and accusations of unfemininity by carefully emphasizing her maintenance of feminine clothing during her travel."<sup>15</sup> Her feminine attire creates ideological distance from the emerging women's movement; concurrently, it distinguishes her from her native African guides and aligns her with a feminine construction of empire.

Kingsley also uses humor and deference to masculine scientific authorities to mitigate her transgression into male scientific and narrative territory. She was vocally anti-feminist and opposed women's participation in scientific societies, but this decision was most likely a strategic one. As Katherine Frank explains, women who fought publicly for their rights were harshly penalized, such that "[Kingsley] clearly felt that if she associated herself with any feminist agitation she would damage her own

credibility."<sup>16</sup> Kingsley consequently makes a point of downplaying her scientific endeavors. In *Travels in West Africa*, Kingsley writes of her failure to classify a banana plant. She remarks, "I am always getting myself mixed over this kind of thing in my attempts 'to contemplate phenomena from a scientific standpoint,' as Cambridge ordered me to do. I'll give the habit up."<sup>17</sup> This is most likely a reference to the Cambridge University Museum of Zoology, which spearheaded many of the natural history collecting efforts in the nineteenth century. Kingsley would have been familiar with the Cambridge methodology, as her family moved to Cambridge in 1884 in order for her brother, Charles, to be closer to the university (Kingsley's father would not permit her to attend the university, although it had been open to women from 1869).<sup>18</sup> Her humor has the effect of diminishing her scientific endeavors, even as she subtly reveals her understanding of the "proper" procedures for collecting specimen. She is collecting "as Cambridge ordered me to do," or with the permission of the supervising male figure of authority. Similarly, Kingsley benefitted from the public support of well-known zoologist Albert Charles Günther. In her introductory chapter to *Travels in West Africa*, she writes:

To Dr. Günther, of the British Museum, I am deeply grateful for the kindness and interest he has always shown regarding all the specimens of natural history I have been able to lay before him; the majority of which must have had very old tales to tell him. Yet his courtesy and attention gave me the thing a worker in any work most wants —the sense that the work was worth doing —and sent me back to work again with the



knowledge that if these things interested a man like him, it was more than sufficient reason for me to go on collecting them.<sup>19</sup>

Kingsley undermines the common accusation that white, middle-class Victorian women were lazy or "idle" by situating herself as a "worker" who collects specimens on the behalf of the male other. Despite her claims to be a mere hobbyist, Kingsley's meticulous collection practices are still evident today —three of the freshwater fish species she found in Africa still carry her name (the *Brycinus kingsleyae*, *Brienomyrus kingsleyae*, and the *Ctenopoma kingsleyae*, respectively).<sup>20</sup> Her humor and deference to male authorities allow her to mask her Adamic naming quest and make it more acceptable to her gender-conscious Victorian readers.

Kingsley also modifies the Adamic/heroic convention through her invocation of egalitarian practices depicted in circulating utopian literature. Indeed, this project is grounded in recent developments in the field of utopian studies that point out the multi-directional field of influence between the utopian narrative and the nonfictional travel account. Although the journey framework has been the essential building-block of the utopian novel since its emergence as a genre in the sixteenth century (the traveler arrives at the utopia, records their observations, and returns home to report on his or her findings), only recently have critics begun to trouble the seemingly fixed boundaries between these two genres. As J.C Davis suggests, we must further investigate how "the disillusionment of travel is also yoked to its idealization."<sup>21</sup> As early as Thomas More's *Utopia*, the desire for scientific knowledge was a key aspect of a utopian society. In his sixteenth-century vision of a nature-worshipping society, "[utopians] never discuss

happiness without joining to their philosophic rationalism certain principles drawn from religion."<sup>22</sup> Rationalism is joined with faith, and in Utopia "every child gets an introduction to good literature, and throughout their lives a large part of the people, men and women alike, spend their leisure time in reading."<sup>23</sup> In Utopia, both men and women acquire an education, and all are expected to participate in the larger quest for knowledge.

Kingsley was not especially religious; in private, she described herself as a 'high and dry Darwinist,' an agnostic who worshipped the 'great God of Science.'<sup>24</sup> Yet even in this humorous comment, we see "science" capitalized; in following the dictates of Science, she brings up the close ties between the pursuit of knowledge and utopian thought. For Lila Marz Harper, this personification of science "allows [Kingsley] to serve in a respectful, nonthreatening auxiliary position within her text without the loss of authority inherent in being bound to the wishes of a particular person."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, in worshipping the "God of Science," Kingsley also invokes the ideal which had circulated in hundreds of utopian novels since the emergence of the genre: that the pursuit of scientific knowledge was not incompatible with either religion or women's participation. Indeed, by the time of Kingsley's voyages to Africa, utopian novels were enjoying a period of peak popularity in Europe and America, and many espoused socialist visions of ideal societies in which women's access to education and the workforce was a necessary building-block.<sup>26</sup> Much has been said about Kingsley's solitary upbringing; she spent her formative years reading in isolation. She once wrote that "the whole of my childhood and youth was spent at home, in the house and garden . . . I had a great

amusing world of my own other people did not know, or care about - that was in the books in my father's library." <sup>27</sup> One might say she was already behaving like a utopian, if within the limitations of her real-world culture.

Kingsley's narratives of travel in Africa also show occasional lapses from the Adamic into a transcendent/utopian narrative mode. In one scene, Kingsley waxes poetic about her trip by streamer along the Ogowé river:

All day long we steam past ever-varying scenes of loveliness whose component parts are ever the same, yet the effect ever different.

Doubtless it is wrong to call it a symphony, yet I know no other words to describe the scenery of the Ogowé. It is as full of life and beauty and passions as any symphony Beethoven ever wrote: the parts changing, interweaving, and returning.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Kingsley's individual identity is lost in the universalizing "we." The "we" encompasses both the male and female spectators of the scene. The landscape is likewise transformed from distinct images to a singular image of plenitude —like the symphony she describes, the landscape can only be viewed as a whole rather than made up of distinct parts. She does not possess or control the scene; here, she is both the Emersonian transparent eye-ball and the transparent ear: a listener who loses her sense of self through the act of listening. She reiterates this concept later in the narrative, differentiating herself from the masculine tendency to create meaning from such scenes. "Do not imagine it gave rise, in what I am pleased to call my mind, to those complicated, poetical reflections natural beauty seems to bring out in other people's minds," she

writes. "It never works that way with me; I just lose all sense of human individuality, all memory of human life, with its grief and worry and doubt, and become part of the atmosphere."<sup>29</sup> Kingsley resists the discourse of mastery over the landscape by refraining from interpretation altogether. In refusing to interpret the landscape, it cannot be named, codified, or conquered, a stance which is directly opposite the conventions of the Adamic narrative mode.

Interestingly, Kingsley's occasional moments of utopian transcendence also extend to her Fan guides. While traveling down rapids on the Ogowé, for example, she recounts a sudden upset of the boat and her two guides:

So shaken up together were we several times that night, that it's a wonder to me, considering the hurry, that we sorted ourselves out correctly with our own particular legs and arms. And although we in the middle of the canoe did some very spirited flapping, our whirlpool-breaking was no more successful than M'bo and Pierre's fending off, and many a wild waltz we danced that night with the waters of the River Ogowé.<sup>30</sup>

In this instance, Kingsley's merging with the landscape extends to her guides, such that it becomes difficult to distinguish white from black, British from African. It is arguably the most powerful utopian imagery of the narrative, as the "waltz" with the River Ogowé momentarily questions the distinctions between racial and cultural categories.

Kingsley's vacillation between Adamic and transcendent narration has resulted in her works being read, rather reductively, in terms of "moments" of utopian discourse. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt highlights one

such "utopian moment" in Kingsley's work —a scene along the Rembwé river in which Kingsley "recovers European innocence" in her appreciation for the nocturnal scene around her. Her enjoyment of the African landscape is utopian, Pratt argues, in that it stands in direct contrast to narratives such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or tales of "the agonies of the European who has landed in the swamp after falling from his promontory."<sup>31</sup> I do not argue with critics such as Pratt who pinpoint Kingsley's moments of romantic/transcendent pleasure as utopian, yet we might expand upon considerations of the "utopian moment" to take a broader view of expressions of utopian thought as they manifested in women's writing on Africa.

In Kingsley's hike to the peak of Mount Cameroon, for example (described in the final chapters of *Travels in West Africa*), we see Kingsley's struggle to balance the demands of the Adamic narrative mode with her desire for a transcendent merging with the landscape. She begins her journey distinctly aware of herself as a feminine spectacle: on her way to the mountain, she stops to rest at a small mission, where she describes doing battle with the many "sightseers" who wish to examine the Victorian lady in their midst. She writes, "You look at a corner one minute and it is empty, and the next time you look that way it is full of rows of white teeth and watching eyes."<sup>32</sup> Later, at the base of the mountain, she meets a German man who insists she bathe in public view. Her response is comical: "I decline. Men can be trying! How in the world is any one going to take a bath in a house with no doors, and only very sketchy wooden window-shutters?"<sup>33</sup> Prior to her climb, Kingsley remains unable to shake the trappings of her gender, her status as out-of-place under the masculine gaze.

It is only through shedding herself of all spectators that she can erase the specter of her femininity and become the solitary Adam in his garden. In a chapter aptly titled "Desertion," Kingsley describes her porters abandoning the summit endeavor one by one, due to fatigue or fear. On September 26, 1895, she summited the mountain, becoming the first known European woman to reach the peak. Like the Adamic explorer, Kingsley aggrandizes her choice to "go on alone into the wild, grey, shifting, whirling mist"<sup>34</sup>; her redundant use of participles emphasizes the power of nature and the risk she is taking by challenging the natural world. Unfortunately, Kingsley's time at the summit is less than triumphant, due to the presence of heavy mist that blocks the landscape from view. She writes: "Verily I am no mountaineer, for there is in me no exultation, but only a deep disgust because the weather has robbed me of my main object in coming here, namely to get a good view and an idea of the way the unexplored mountain range behind Calabar trends."<sup>35</sup> Her moment of mastery of the landscape, expressed through the act of seeing, is ultimately thwarted; she cannot see, because she is not a (masculine) "mountaineer."

Alison Blunt sees Kingsley's climb up Mount Cameroon as less an example of "masterful comic irreverence" (Pratt) as revelatory of Kingsley's fraught gendered subjectivity. The summit, and Kingsley's inability to see the landscape because of the mist "ambivalently locates her both inside and outside a masculine, imperialist tradition of exploration, conquest and surveillance, illustrating the complexities and contradictions of subject personality."<sup>36</sup> There can be no doubt as to the complex

negotiations involved, as Kingsley's scientific ambitions come into constant conflict with the rules of Victorian female propriety.

Upon her return to the mountain post, the German representative there is again insistent Kingsley take a bath, but this time, "his Imperial and Royal Majesty's representative [was] making a door, tightening the boards up with wedges in a very artful and professional way."<sup>37</sup> The construction of the door implies a level of respect that had not existed before her climb, yet the act of bathing symbolizes her transition from an aberrant public spectacle to a proper Victorian lady. The bathing is gesture of return: she is "once more fit for polite society."<sup>38</sup> It is not a coincidence that once more she is encouraged to bathe almost immediately upon her arrival in Victoria. "It was the bath palaver once again," Kingsley ruefully remarks, expressing a certain sense of relief that she was "tidy before [her host] returned to dinner."<sup>39</sup> Her return to "polite society" through bathing is a symbolic departure from the garden, a concession to her awareness of her own female body and the resulting loss of mastery over her surroundings.

It is also essential to look beyond considerations of "utopian moments" —to consider the way the pursuit of natural history knowledge was itself as a utopian project. In embarking on her Adamic naming quest, Kingsley was taking part in a global utopian prerogative that was uniquely accessible to Victorian women at this time. The science of "collecting" —influenced by Romanticism and the transatlantic influence of American transcendentalism —was characterized by the desire to illuminate the interconnectivity between all life on Earth. The widespread popularity of Linnean plant taxonomies in the early decades of the century had opened the door to women's participation in natural

history collecting, as Victorians of all classes were inspired to go out into nature and take part in what Lynn L. Merrill calls the "romance of Victorian natural history"<sup>40</sup> Women were openly encouraged to go out into their back gardens and surrounding countryside to collect specimens of plants and animals under the umbrella of hobbyism.

In 1855, Kingsley's own uncle, renowned author Charles Kingsley, wrote that women should take up natural history collecting as a cure for "idleness": "You cannot deny that there must be a fascination with Natural History," he writes in *Glaucus; Or, the Wonders of the Shore*. "Your daughters, perhaps, have been seized with the prevailing 'Pteridomania', and are collecting and buying ferns . . . and yet you cannot deny that they find an enjoyment in it, and are more active, more cheerful, more self-forgetful over it, than they would have been over novels and gossip."<sup>41</sup> It is quite telling that, when Kingsley's editor, George MacMillan, critiqued *Travels in West Africa* for sounding like a "story told by a man," she replied, "I went out there as a *naturalist* not as a sort of circus . . ." (emphasis added).<sup>42</sup> Those who did not conform to racial or gender categories risked becoming spectacles, subject to the objectifying (and sexualizing) public gaze. In contrast, Kingsley repeatedly stresses her role as naturalist as a means to mitigate her transgression into the more specialized (and masculine) scientific fields of what would now be called ethnology, anthropology, and ichthyology. She places herself firmly within the circle of the women who go out collecting in their back gardens. Like the "daughters" in *Glaucus*, Kingsley makes her pursuit of "fish and fetish" acceptable to Victorian readers by transforming —if only rhetorically—her scientific ambition into a simple pastime.



Africa was clearly far outside the bounds of the typical Victorian back garden, however. Harper notes that "women naturalists . . . did not have easy access to [funding] opportunities and support, and generally functioned with smaller-scaled operations while attempting to justify the usefulness of their works so that they could gain similar government support."<sup>43</sup> Kingsley negotiated the constraints on women naturalists by rhetorically transforming Africa into a "garden" —a domestic space suitable for female intervention. "Regions like Central Africa are like unto a neglected garden," she writes in her 1899 companion text to *Travels in West Africa, West African Studies*. "You can go and pull up or cut down everything and have a bonfire, and the garden will be tidy, as tidy as the Abomination of Desolation . . . Or you can take the other course with that wild garden, weed it, plant it, prune it, cultivate it into a beautiful thing."<sup>44</sup> Kingsley's garden rhetoric is a direct response to those who advocated genocide as a strategy for British colonization of Africa. In prior chapters, she presents an "alternative plan" —an idealistic vision for a future governance based on trade rule, in which England would serve primarily in an administrative role over an African representative government. African participation would be necessary; it would be "a system where the Englishman and the African co-operate together for their mutual benefit and advancement."<sup>45</sup> In this model of colonial society, Britain would serve as an administrative mother, overseeing the African government, fostering cooperation between races, and preventing the masculine forces of "Desolation." In contrast with the garden of the Adamic hero (a space to be mastered), Kingsley's garden is an idealized extension of the domestic space.

She thus becomes the maternal figure whose role is to "weed it, plant it, [and] prune it" —in other words, to nurture the garden the way one would a child.

If Kingsley's Africa was a garden, however, it was not *the* garden. As J.M. Coetzee once stated, "Africa could never, in the European imagination, be the home of the earthly paradise because Africa was not a new world."<sup>46</sup> Like many of her predecessors, Kingsley was invested in the racialized notions of human progress that emerged with the application of Darwin's theories of evolution to human societies. Even into the twentieth century, the "myth of empty space" had been replaced by the "myth of progress," a teleological view of history that reinforced the rhetoric of European racial superiority.<sup>47</sup> Kingsley questioned the "dogma that all human beings came in the beginning from a single pair, appearing somewhere in Asia"<sup>48</sup> and suggested that the origins of humanity might be far more complex than would be accounted for by Biblical narrative. She humorously remarks that "West Africa has not been just shot up out of the ocean by a submarine volcanic explosion; nor are we lading on it out of Noah's ark."<sup>49</sup> She also resisted the notion that the original location of Eden might have been somewhere in Africa. "I am not planting an African garden of Eden to rival the Asiatic one," she writes. "I am only saying I agree with the French ethnologists and fancy there have been several points of origin of the human race."<sup>50</sup> For Kingsley, a follower of Darwin's theories and social Darwinism, Africa represented the final piece of the global evolutionary puzzle. That being said, Kingsley's attraction to Africa was at least partly attributable to Africa's utopian potential in the Victorian popular imagination at this time.

Also noticeably different about Kingsley's garden is the presence of people. Unlike many of her predecessors writing in the Adamic mode, Kingsley does not give in to the temptation to describe the garden as an unpeopled landscape. Driven by the desire to erase the presence of Africans from the exploitable landscape, Africa was often portrayed by imperialist powers as "Eden-like . . . a fertile but empty space to the white man, waiting to be brought into being by him."<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Kingsley's gaze is distinctly maternal—her Eden is inhabited, albeit by "children." In *Travels in West Africa*, she recounts two trips along West African waterways, both times accompanied only by native guides, members of the Fan (Fang) tribe. She describes spending much of the trip keeping her guides happy—acquiring meals for them and tending to their needs. After negotiating passage into the Ogowé rapids, Kingsley remarks, "This affair being settled I start off, like an old hen with a brood of chickens to provide for, to get chop [food] for my men . . ."<sup>52</sup> She also writes of her admiration for the strength and industry of the Fan: "The Fan is full of fire, temper, intelligence and go; very teachable, rather difficult to manage, quick to take offence, and utterly indifferent to human life."<sup>53</sup> Though undoubtedly condescending in tone, this passage reflects Kingsley's maternal role. She becomes the archetypal teacher/mother, a stand-in for the British Empire.

This maternal framing is complimented by Kingsley's use of domestic imagery throughout *Travels in West Africa*. In an oft-quoted passage, Kingsley travels down the Rembwé river by moonlight, with a bed sheet for a sail: "Forward rose the form of our sail, idealized from bed-sheetdom to glory; and the little red glow of our cooking fire gave a single note of warm colour to the cold light of the moon."<sup>54</sup> Pratt and others have

highlighted this scene as an example of Kingsley's "domestication of the wilderness"<sup>55</sup>; the moon casts a feminine light on the scene, and together with the sheet sail and the campfire forms the image of a domestic space out of the African wilderness. Africa's plants, animals, and people all become part of the domestic sphere, absorbed and transformed by Kingsley's maternal, imperial gaze.

Kingsley's infantilization of native Africans authorizes her presence as a solo female traveler in Africa through an emphasis on (white) English racial and cultural superiority. This relationship is perhaps most symbolically represented in a scene in which Kingsley picks up a piece of "river lettuce" (an aquatic weed): "Down river that young thing goes, looking as innocent as a turtle dove. If you pick it up as it comes by your canoe and look underneath you see it has got just a stump. Roots? Oh dear no! What does a sweet green rose like that want roots for? It only wants to float about on the river and be happy; so you put the precious humbug back, and it drifts away with a smile . . ." <sup>56</sup> Kingsley's treatment of the river lettuce mirrors her philosophy towards Africa, particularly the ongoing imperial debate about how to manage the nomadic tribes who made their homes in the West African jungle. The weed is child-like, brought into being by the maternal presence who opts to let it assert its autonomy. The river lettuce does not have roots, and thereby is designed by nature to drift. Under the approving maternal/imperial gaze, Kingsley lets the weed go in a gesture of ultimate control. The river lettuce "drifts away with a smile," content in a subordinate role. Kingsley's portrayal of the river lettuce as "innocent" echoes the primitivist and paternalistic rhetoric that circulated in Victorian popular literature at the time, and makes clear that

her reworking of both the Adamic narrative mode and the garden trope remained dependent upon her Western, racialized worldview.

In Kingsley's writings on Africa, utopian discourses served as passport to the restricted realms of travel writing and scientific exploration. Kingsley continues to be lauded today as an early example of women's scientific exploration, although it is notable that most of the recent popular editions of her work have excised her racial science or relegated her ethnographic research to appendices. Nonetheless, Kingsley's racialized worldview was inextricable from her intervention into the masculine narrative sphere. Her rhetoric of Africa as a domestic garden would be rendered incomplete without the children with which she peopled her utopian landscape. Her framing says much about the influence of racial science on depictions of Africa, and her invocation of Edenic mythology throughout her writing reveals the points of overlap between the utopian narrative and travel writing at the end of the nineteenth century. Women deployed utopian discourse as a means to pursue their scientific interests, not only in terms of brief moments of transcendence but also in terms of larger, ongoing projects such as the pursuit of natural history knowledge. Africa was not Eden, but the way Kingsley created a domestic, utopian vision out of the African jungle says much about the challenges facing solo women travelers who pursued their scientific ambitions despite the restrictions placed on them as women in the Victorian public sphere.

## Endnotes

1. Powell, *The Last Frontier*, vii.
2. Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History*, 15.
3. Youngs, *Nineteenth-Century Travels*, xv.
4. Lewis, *The American Adam*, 5.
5. Gen. 2:19 (OT).
6. Delimeau, *The History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, 196.
7. Frank, *A Voyager Out*, 32.
8. See Kennedy, "Kingsley's Multiple Voices," 153-165.
9. See Blunt, *Travel Gender, and Imperialism*.
10. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 210.
11. Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism*, 100.
12. Harper, *Solitary Travelers*, 22.
13. Kingsley, *The Story of West Africa*, 130.
14. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 270.
15. Harper, *Solitary Travelers*, 195.
16. Frank, *A Voyager Out*, 257.
17. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 141.
18. See Frank, *A Voyager Out*, 39.
19. Kingsley, Mary. *Travels in West Africa*, 6.
20. Hopkins Lab, "The Biodiversity of Freshwater Fish."
21. Davis, "Going Nowhere," 6.
22. More, *Utopia*, 59-60.
23. *Ibid.*, 58
24. Frank, *A Voyager Out*, 134.
25. Harper, *Solitary Travelers*, 203.
26. One prominent example is Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, which depicts a socialist society in which women also work and take part in scientific study. This period also saw the emergence of feminist utopias such as Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora: Or, the World of Women (1880-1881)*.
27. qtd. in Frank, *A Voyager Out*, 23.
28. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 129.
29. *Ibid.*, 178.
30. *Ibid.*, 173-174.
31. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 211.
32. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 558.
33. *Ibid.*, 563.
34. *Ibid.*, 593.
35. *Ibid.*, 594.
36. Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism*, 103.
37. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 603.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 608.
40. See note 2 above.
41. Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 4.
42. Mary Kingsley to George Macmillan, December 18, 1894. Quoted in Harper, *Solitary Travelers*, 193.
43. Harper, *Solitary Travelers*, 23.

44. Kingsley, *West African Studies*, 428.
45. *Ibid.*, 343.
46. Coetzee, *White Writing*, 2.
47. Dohra, *Landscapes of Hope*, 22.
48. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 459.
49. Kingsley, *West African Studies*, 268
50. see note 48 above.
51. Ahmad et al., "Rehabilitating Eden,"25.
52. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 169.
53. *Ibid.*, 329.
54. *Ibid.*, 338.
55. Harper writes that Kingsley's descriptions "domesticate the wilderness of the jungle . . . indicating that here too there are rules and order" (*Solitary Travelers*, 212).
56. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 379.

#### 4. UNDER WATER (A NOVEL)

The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. —Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Q: State the most important rule in scuba diving.

A: Breathe continuously and never, never hold your breath.

— *Open Water Diver Course Knowledge Review 1 Answer Key*

#### Part I: Descent

1

The day she learned her father was dead, Jess went scuba diving. Her bare feet were planted on the deck, the rough, no-slip surface digging into her toes, her knees bent to accommodate the boat's roll and sway. Marcos, the captain, guided the boat through the rougher waters where the western and eastern sides of the island met and converged. George stood next to the wheel, his tanned face turned toward the mainland, his long silver hair tied up on top of his head in a sumo knot.

"*Corriente?*" Marcos asked, tapping a pack of Belmonts against his wrist.

Jess knew guys who could tell how bad the current was from the way the gorgonian fans bent like trees in wind, but when she pulled her mask down over her eyes and leaned over the rail until her face broke the surface, the reef looked as it always had, the fans and soft corals waving like misshapen flags.



*My father is dead.* The words were unfathomable, like hearing about the death of a president, or a dictator. She couldn't imagine her father as a corpse. Powerless. In her memories of him, he loomed over her like a great shadow. To the world, he'd been a symbol of military perfection —polished boots, crisp uniforms, unbending self-discipline. The last time she'd spoken to him was four years ago, when she told him she was dropping out of college. He'd slammed the door in her face. He'd screened his calls after that. The one time he'd picked up, she'd said, *you can't ignore me forever. I'm your daughter.*

*I don't have a daughter,* he'd said, and hung up the phone. She hadn't tried again after that. Should she care that he was dead? He'd been dead to her for years.

Jess let out the breath she'd been holding and came back up over the rail.

"*Bueno,*" she said, and Marcos killed the motor. She wasn't sure how bad the current was, but the strategy of pretending to be more competent than she was had worked so far. She'd done her Instructor six months ago, and she'd been working as a Divemaster for a year before that. Hundreds of dives under her belt, but there were gaps in her knowledge. None of the military bases where she'd lived as a child had been near the sea. She was still learning to handle boats, to tie mooring lines, to recognize the signs of an oncoming storm. Most of the time, she learned by observing and keeping quiet. A lesson from her father.

The customers were almost ready. Two Canadian guys, Brett and Charlie, and an American woman on her own. Mindy? Mary? Something with an M. Jess remembered the woman saying something about being on vacation with a fiancé who didn't dive.

"Everybody set?" she called.

The Canadians were geared up, but the woman —Michelle? —was having trouble zipping up the back of her shorty. Jess strode over and zipped up the wetsuit, an expensive brand with bright pink stripes. It lacked the sun-bleached appearance of much-loved dive gear.

The woman lifted a manicured hand up to the back of her neck, checking the zipper.

"Aren't the waves kind of big?"

"You won't feel anything once we get below the surface. Need help with your tank?" The woman shook her head. Everything about her was unremarkable. Stringy, brunette hair. Pink skin, peeling around the edges of a face unused to the absence of makeup. Another day-tripper or cruise-shipper. Jess had been working at this shop for three months, and she rarely saw the same divers twice.

At least the shop still had customers. A little over three months ago, President Zelaya had been sent into exile in some kind of military coup. The cruise ships were still coming, but there had been rioting on the mainland, and there weren't as many tourists on the island. The mainland and the islands often seemed like separate worlds, but the repercussions of civil unrest could be felt even here. They were already well into the rainy season, and if things continued to go south on the mainland, she might have to leave the island and find work elsewhere.

Jess left the woman to her own devices and went to put on her gear. Twisting the valve on the top of her tank produced the satisfying hiss of air filling the hoses. She ran

through a quick equipment check, then sat with her back to the tank, sliding her arms into her BCD and securing the straps across her chest and waist. The dive computer on her wrist read 14:23.

Her father's death would have been a disappointment, had he lived to see it. No fiery explosion, no unexpected burst of enemy fire. Heart attack —swift, fatal. She could see him falling forward into a pile of paperwork in his office, while outside his sand-dusted windows, a war raged on. Had he arrived back in the States with the other victims of war, his coffin draped with an American flag? And where would they send him? Jess' mother had died when she was four. Car accident. Her father had long ago cut all ties with his family, and as far as Jess knew, she had no living relatives left. For her father, the military had been his home, his family. What would they do with him, now that he was dead? The email from the Department of State, dated a week earlier, had urged her to call immediately. She spoke with an apologetic officer who explained that they'd held the funeral last Wednesday. Full military honors, of course. Very sorry for your loss, blah, blah, blah. She wondered what would happen if she didn't return. Would the ashes of her father be abandoned in some APO Box at Dover?

She could sense the others waiting, watching her. George was the only one who knew; his eyes radiated concern. What he didn't understand was that diving would help. Under water, a stillness came over her. The surface world became distant, irrelevant.

"Let's go," she said. She went to the stern and threw the nylon line into the water. It floated on the surface, the orange buoy on the end bobbing in the waves.

Marcos went back to the wheel; George said nothing.

She motioned towards the stern. "Okay guys. Remember the briefing. Stay behind me, buddy up." One at a time, she and Marcos helped the Canadians to cross the deck, grasping their tank valves to steady them. Once they'd splashed in, they hung onto the line, waiting.

The woman wobbled to the stern and gripped Jess' shoulder hard as she put on her fins. Jess could still feel the imprint of the woman's fingers in her flesh after she joined the others in the water. George saluted and dropped in with his usual flair.

"*Cincuenta minutos*," Jess said, pointing north. Fifty minutes. Marcos gave a quick nod and lit a cigarette.

Jess let herself fall backwards off the stern. The relief from the afternoon heat was instant. She kicked against the current and let the cool water infiltrate her suit. The others clung to the nylon line, waiting for her signal, masks on and ready. The woman held on to the line with both hands.

*My father is* —the thought came, and Jess shoved it away. *Later.*

Jess gave the thumbs down. Hoses rose, releasing air from BCDs. The jackets deflated, and one by one, they sank. Before joining them, Jess took one last look west. The horizon line rose and fell where the sea met the sky, like sand dunes seen from a distance.

As soon as her head was under, the world went quiet. Below, there was only blue and the beams of sunlight that seemed to coalesce somewhere beneath her feet. They'd drifted off the wall, but not too far. She got into a horizontal position and kicked forward. The heads of coral rose from the sea floor like bulbous mountains orbited by

schools of reef fish. As they approached, a school of red snappers veered around them and disappeared into the blue. Multihued reef fish darted in and out of crevasses in the coral heads, enacting their daily rituals of mating, fighting, eating. Where the coral ended, the wall dropped down. Far below, hazy with distance, was a shelf of sand and rock, where few things lived.

They let themselves be pushed by the current, Jess at the head of the pack. There was no sound beyond the crackling of the coral and the soft whoosh and bubble of her inhaled and exhaled breath. The peace of the dive settled into her skin, the way it always did.

When the others began to scatter, distracted by this or that, Jess pulled her noisemaker out of her cummerbund and shook it. A sound like sleigh bells. Four chins bobbed up. Jess brought together her two index fingers. *Buddy up*. Gradually, the group reformed itself, the woman and George taking a position behind her, the two Canadians making up the back of the pack.

They went deeper: sixty feet, seventy. Yellows, oranges, and reds fled from the depth, until all they could see were deep shades of blue and brown. They found a lobster; a giant, coral-encrusted crab; a plain of garden eels poking up from the sea floor like a thousand beckoning fingers. As they explored, the current propelled them relentlessly forward. There was no need to kick. Jess crossed her ankles and folded her arms in front of her chest, feeling as if she were the stationary one, while the world rotated on and on.

She noticed a spotted eel curled around the base of a rock. Its black mouth gaped. Tiny white teeth jutted like stalactites and stalagmites from its jaw. *Look*, she said to her

divers, two fingers darting towards her eyes and away again. She moved her hand in a slow undulation. *Eel*. The Canadians had good buoyancy, but the woman bumped into them as she tried to get close enough to see. She had good body position, but her fin-kicks were awkward, as if she were trying to ride a bicycle underwater. One of the Canadians reached out and gently pushed her away to keep her from knocking the reg out of his mouth. Jess looked up to see George, slightly above them, smiling around the edges of his reg. The eel retreated from so many unwelcome visitors, and they moved on.

The current increased until they flew like great undersea birds. The mounds of coral began to flatten into the barren expanse she'd heard some divers call Texas. The corals dwindled, with larger and larger sand patches between the mounds. Jess didn't know this site well, but she knew there could be strong currents out here, past the protective border of the reef. The change was gradual, but soon the Gorgonian fans didn't wave; they bent over like the backs of decrepit old men. The sea floor dropped down and away. Soon they'd reach the cliff that marked the end of the underwater shelf.

She rang her noisemaker and gave the thumbs up. A short dive, just forty minutes, but it would have to be enough. She began to lead the way to the surface, but she felt heavy, as if she were wearing twice her usual amount of weight. Something was wrong.

Jess' breath sent up clouds of bubbles, sheets of air that expanded as they reached for the surface. She checked her wrist computer. *Shit*. They'd dropped twenty feet. She'd never felt a current like this; it pushed down like a vast, invisible hand. The others

followed her, struggling. The current wanted them to go down and down. Below, the water grew darker, the sea floor swallowed up by the blue. Too deep —to go deeper was to risk getting the bends, or worse. She'd been trained for emergency situations, but it didn't stop the pounding of her heart, the hyper-awareness that came with the sudden influx of adrenaline to her system.

*Drop your weights, she signaled. Inflate. Ascend!*

One by one, weight belts spiraled down and disappeared. She heard air exploding into jackets that puffed up around her divers' torsos and shoulders. Jess unclipped the weight pockets built into her BCD and let her own weights fall away. Better, but she would still have to swim hard to make the surface. She'd never felt anything like this; downward currents were rare in open water.

About ten feet above her, the Canadians flashed the okay. Jess waved for George to go with them. George hesitated, pointing to the woman. A question.

Below them, the woman bobbed her knees in an almost comic attempt to fight the current. Jess knew George was a strong old bastard, but he'd lose steam quickly in this current. He was in his sixties, and not a trained rescue diver. Besides, the woman was her diver, her responsibility.

*I'll get her. Go.*

The three divers strained upwards, their jackets fully inflated. Jess dropped down to the woman, grabbed her tank valve between her index and middle fingers, and heaved upwards with her fins. The effort was like running on a treadmill on maximum speed. Clouds of bubbles exploded around their heads. Jess' air was below five hundred PSI

now, cresting the red line, and she doubted the woman was doing any better. Overhead, the surface shone with the promise of sunlight and air. They were losing their battle with the current; the woman was worn out, barely kicking. Jess' arm burned. The fingers clasping the woman's tank valve started to cramp up. Her dive computer beeped a warning: *135 feet. Exceeding recreational depth.*

The sea had them; it didn't want to let them go.

*You have to kick like this!* Jess signed to the woman, using the two fingers of her free hand to imitate the straight-legged kicks of an experienced diver. But the woman was starting to panic, her eyes wide, fixated on the surface. Jess pulled harder, and heard again the plaintive beeping of her computer.

*140 feet. 10:00 Decompression Stop Required.*

Time slowed, crystallized. Beneath them, the sand had given way to indigo, dark and seductive. It would be easy to give up, Jess thought. She was so tired. Would it be so bad to sink, to let go? Her body would become part of the soup of life around her, part of the fish, the coral, the current.

No. She was narc'd. This deep, some people laughed; some lost the ability to tell up from down. For Jess, it had always been a deceptive relaxation, like being stoned.

*You know what you have to do.*

The computer on her wrist beeped again. 150 feet. Jess laughed, a hysterical sound, muffled by her regulator. She had never been this far past the recreational limit. She couldn't wait any longer. The fingers grasping the woman's tank spasmed and released.



The woman grabbed at Jess, clawed up her body. Her hands scratched at Jess' face. Jess' mask fell away. Her face was suddenly too cool, too light. A sting as a fingernail carved a burning line under her right eye. She acted instinctively, leaning back and jerking her knee up and out. A cracking sound as her knee connected with the woman's head. The pain came a second later, the nerve endings in her knee jangling. Although she couldn't see much without the mask, Jess knew she'd hit too hard. The grasping fingers were gone; the woman wasn't moving. Above, the surface glowed with refracted sunlight, and it was to that light that Jess kicked. She didn't think: she fled.

Almost immediately, the pressure in her eardrums eased. Her computer beeped again, probably to warn her that she was ascending too fast. She couldn't read her gauges or her computer without her mask. Breathing became hard, like sucking air through a straw. The tank, empty. She tried to exhale slowly as she ascended, as she'd been trained, but she knew it wouldn't be enough. Her lungs burned for air; she was overwhelmed with an all-consuming desire to reach the surface. To breathe. To live. But the surface was too far, and a darkness was beginning to creep around the edges of her vision. If she passed out, the reg would fall from her mouth, and she would drown.

Something clasped her shoulder, and a yellow object darted towards her face. The last of the air in her lungs bubbled away. In front of her, a shape: a gray, jellyfish-like cloud. Relief surged through her. George. The yellow thing was his octopus, a spare regulator carried by all divers for emergencies such as these. She spit out her own reg and grabbed the spare, then shoved it in her mouth and pushed down hard on the purge button to clear the hoses of water. She gulped down air, then forced herself to slow

down. *In. Out. Good. I can breathe; I'm alive.* George clasped her right arm so she wouldn't drift away from the tank they now shared.

They waited at fifteen feet as long as they could, but Jess knew it was too late to stop the bends, if they came. When George's air neared zero, Jess removed the reg from her mouth and used it to inflate her safety sausage. The neon orange buoy was propelled upwards like a rocket seeking orbit. Marcos would see it; he would come. Jess tried to force her eyes to focus, despite the water that turned everything into indistinct shapes. She needed to see George's face. She needed to know how much he'd seen.

They broke the surface. Waves slapped against her bare face. She blinked water out of her eyes and gripped George's BCD strap. She inflated her own BCD manually, pressing the hose to her lips and blowing it up like a balloon. Floating again, she took stock of her surroundings. The coast was too far away, much farther than it should be. The island looked small, an outcropping of rock perched on the water. She'd been so focused on getting out of the downward current, she'd hardly felt the sideways current pushing them out to sea.

"Marcos?" George asked.

"He'll see us. He always does," Jess said, with more confidence than she felt.

They heard the boat before they saw it. A bumble-bee hum that grew to a roar; a white shape bobbing on the apex of a wave. The boat circled once and came to a stop. The motor kicked up foam that splashed their faces. Marcos left the engine idling and ran to the rail, his hands clasped over his head. Were they okay?

They matched his gesture, arms raised in half circles. *Okay*. He tossed the ladder over the side, and George waved for her to go first. Her legs buckled on the metal rungs, and she almost fell. God, she was tired. She unclipped her gear and let Marcos slide it over her head and onto the deck. She managed the rest of the way up on her own.

"*La muchacha?*" Marcos asked. Jess shook her head, unwilling to say the words. She still felt the ache in her knee, the echo of bone striking bone. The woman had to be dead, had to be.

The two Canadians stood near the rail, already out of their wetsuits. Their eyes scanned the surface for bubbles, for any sign of a diver below.

George stood on the deck with one hand covering his mouth, a frailty in the uncertain slump of his shoulders. His expression told her what she'd needed to know. Sympathy, sadness. He'd seen, then. Would he tell the police how Jess had kicked the woman? The v-shaped cushion of flesh between her index and middle finger was red and swollen from gripping the woman's tank valve. In her rescue course, Jess had learned how to approach a Distressed Diver Under the Surface. Most of the time, the training was intended for panicked, out-of-air divers who held their breath and swam too fast for the surface. The key was to slow them down, to get them to exhale the air rapidly expanding in their lungs. The training hadn't covered downward currents. If a diver was panicking on the surface, you were supposed to kick out with a knee, but only hard enough to get away and give the diver time to calm down. Jess had kicked with too much force. Had she been a better instructor, the woman would be alive.

*Aren't the waves kind of big?*

*You won't feel anything once we get below the surface.*

Jess hadn't even bothered to look at the woman's paperwork before the dive. If she had, she would've seen the lack of experience, and told the woman to stay on the boat.

Jess pulled her wetsuit down to her waist and lifted the seat off one of the benches. She retrieved the oxygen case. Inside was a tank, a pocket mask, and a short length of transparent tubing. Jess attached the tube to the pocket mask and connected it to the tank's nozzle. Then she pressed the mask over her nose and mouth and turned the knob. The air was cool, medicinal. She'd taken in too much nitrogen, but each body's chemistry was different. There was no telling if what she'd done would cause tiny bubbles to form in her blood stream and collect in her joints. It could be hours before the pain started and she knew for sure.

George had been watching the proceedings, saying nothing, but now he came over and sat down on the bench next to her.

"How bad?"

"Don't know," she rasped. Her tongue felt thick, coated in salt. "Water."

He handed her a plastic bottle and she took a sip. It was like drinking lukewarm tea, but it eased the ache in her throat.

"We should take you to the clinic."

"No. Keep looking."

Marcos cursed and went back to the wheel. After making a call on the emergency channel, they went up the coast and back down again. Other boats joined the search,

coordinating their efforts by radio. Marcos took them in an ever-widening circle, until they'd gone farther than the current could have taken the woman. The oxygen tank ran dry, and Jess pushed it away.

George reached out with a tentative thumb, as if to trace the cut under her eye. He didn't touch her, but she winced and turned her head.

"*Mija*," he said, his voice soft. His nickname for her: Spanish for *my daughter*. "You have to be the one to call it."

She couldn't look at his face again. "I know," she said. She raised her voice to be heard over the motor. "*¡Vamos!*"

Marcos turned the wheel toward shore. The search would continue without them. If they hadn't been already, the police would be notified. Someone would have to tell the fiancé.

"What was her name?" she asked, but no one answered.

## 2

At the dock, Jess helped tie the mooring lines, but Marcos waved her off when she tried to pick up some of the empty tanks.

"What the fuck?"

The shop manager's hands were upraised, his fingers spread wide. From the deck of the beach bar behind him, tourists sat in tableau, beer bottles frozen halfway to their lips. The mellow riffs of Carlos Santana emanated from the bar's outdoor speakers.

Jess didn't like Paolo. He was too cocky, too convinced of his own coolness. He rarely wore shirts, choosing instead to bare his carefully-sculpted abdominal muscles. Like most dive instructors, his body was marked with the usual assortment of ocean-themed tattoos—a whale shark that chased its own tail around his left bicep; a green turtle that stared serenely out from above a nipple.

Jess wiped sweat from under her eyes, and her hand came away bloody. She hoped she didn't need stitches. Her thoughts came in waves of cold logic, everything reduced to the practical. All she wanted was to get back to her rented room in West End. She wanted this day over.

"Let's talk inside," she said, and walked past him in the direction of the shop.

Behind her, Paolo began shouting at Marcos in Italian-accented Spanish. She heard George's footsteps, too, but she turned and raised a hand. "Ten minutes. Can you get us a cab?" George gave a reluctant nod and headed to the bar to use the phone.

The door to the shop stood open. Static crackled over the radio. Paolo had left it on, probably after hearing Marcos' call on the emergency channel. From what she could tell from the mixture of English and Spanish voices, the body hadn't been found yet.

There were no customers in the shop, which was little more than a grass-roofed hut tucked off to the side of the much-larger resort. The interior was typical of an island shop. Dive gear sat gathering dust inside a glass cabinet. More equipment dangled from hooks on the wall. As long as Jess had been there, they'd never sold anything but snorkeler gear: masks, fins.

She went behind the counter to the back room, which doubled as a classroom and staff lounge. PADI books everywhere. Advanced Open Water. Nitrox. Open Water manuals in at least six different languages. They were stacked on top of the shelves along the wall and scattered on the round table that took up most of the space in the room. Posters on the wall showed pictures of divers, accompanied by cheerful slogans. *Dive In!* one proclaimed, over a picture of two divers swimming alongside a coral-encrusted wreck.

Jess found the first aid kit and collected what she needed: gauze, alcohol, a butterfly bandage. She poured alcohol onto the gauze and dabbed at her face, inhaling sharply at the sting. The gauze came away red. There was no mirror, but she could see her own reflection well enough in the blank screen of the shop's ancient PC. She cinched closed the scratch under her eye with the butterfly bandage, then wiped away the rest of the blood with the remaining gauze.

Next, she went out back to the staff equipment shed and began collecting her things. A part of her was amazed at her own ability to function, to do what needed to be done. *You can fall apart later*, she told herself. *Not now.*

The shed's interior was cool and dark. Racks of BCDs and wetsuits took up one side of the tiny space, while the other side had a makeshift table for repairs, under which sat stacks of lead weights in varying sizes. Nearby, regulators dangled, spider-like, from the wall. The room smelled comfortingly of salt water and damp neoprene. She took out her mesh gear bag and began throwing stuff in: her plastic instructor slates with lists of dive exercises and regulations; an underwater compass, grimy with salt; her spare

wetsuit. As she packed, she became aware of the stiffness of her movements. It was as if she were standing somewhere far away and apart from herself, operating the machinery that made her body move.

She checked one more time to see if she had everything, then went back into the shop.

She'd come across the shop three months ago, after a week spent trolling the west side of the island for work. Paolo and his girlfriend, Federica, owned the place, while another 30-something couple, Antonella and Carlo, did the rest. The two couples had known each other for years; they knew each other's families in Italy. They all had lithe, muscular bodies, sun-brown skin, tattoos. They weren't shy in telling Jess that they hated Americans. Americans were too loud, too brash. Americans came off the cruise ships in hordes; most came only for their day at the beach, leaving with artificial impressions of island life. West Bay itself was crafted to create the illusion of paradise: the sea grass that proliferated on the rest of the island had been torn out. Americans came and took pictures that fulfilled their preconceptions of paradise, and when they were gone they left empty beer bottles and cigarette butts in the sand, to be raked away by sun-withered Hondurans who were barely making enough money to feed their families. Americans, the Italians told her, consumed everything, and left behind only trash. It was partly true, but Jess didn't hate the tourists the way Paolo and his cohort did. She envied their happy, middle-class ignorance, the insularity of their families. She watched the children who made sand-castles on the sand under the benign gaze of their parents; college kids drinking and taking blurry photos from a trip most of them would



barely remember. She might have been one of those people, had circumstances in her life been different. She didn't mind being put in charge of a group of cruise-shippers on the days Paolo and Federica couldn't be bothered to work. Cruise-shippers were good tippers, if terrible divers, most of the time.

Jess had always known her days at the shop were numbered. Paolo only gave her the divers no one else wanted to take: fat people, old people, children. At the end of each day, he paid her commission in cash and sent her home. Sometimes, the others had drinks together after the day's dives. They didn't invite her to join. They spoke in Italian, but she understood more than she let on. They called her only *La Americana*. She was comforted in those long walks home by the presence of the bootleg DVD salesmen and the vendors lugging home unsold conch shells and cheap jewelry. She walked home with them, single file along the water, and sometimes one of the men would reach out a hand to help her cross some of the more perilous rocks that separated sections of beach. They never spoke, other than perfunctory iterations of *Buenas*, which meant only *good*, the rest of the greeting eroded away as if from fatigue. *Buenas*, she'd say back, and they'd continue their homeward treks, the shadows of their slumped backs stretched along the sand like tired ghosts.

Jess went to the filing cabinet and began rifling through, looking for the accident report forms. She opened another drawer.

"What happened?" Paolo snarled from the doorway. "Explain. Now."

"There was a downward current. Worse than I've ever seen."

Paolo blew a puff of air through his lips in disdain. "We don't get downward currents here. What the fuck were you doing out there?"

Jess ignored the question. "Where do you keep the accident report forms?"

He stepped forward and shoved her out of the way. He got the forms from the filing cabinet and slammed the drawer so hard a framed certification fell off the wall. Jess reached out a hand to take the forms, but he threw the papers at her face. They missed, and fluttered to the floor. She retrieved them.

"I can't believe you," he said, his voice heavy with rage.

Jess sat down at the table, her face flushed with the confrontation. Her heart raced, and she blinked away unwelcome tears. She would not let Paolo make her cry. She would not. She pressed buttons on her dive computer. Dive stats scrolled on the tiny circular screen. She wrote them down.

Paolo paced. "Everyone on the island knows what happened. At *my* shop. I should never have let you work here."

He was right. On a small island, reputation was everything. The shop could lose customers if anyone posted a negative review online, and if PADI, the Professional Association of Dive Instructors, determined the shop had been negligent, it could lose its membership to the organization.

Jess finished the form, and stood up to leave. Paolo looked at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"What's this?" he said. He jabbed a finger at the bandage under her eye. "Is that from her?"

"She panicked. Read the report."

The muscles of his jaw twitched. "You don't leave a diver behind."

"No," Jess said. "I guess you don't."

Jess moved to leave, but Paolo grabbed her wrist. His grip was too hard; she could hear her joints pop. "Where do you think you're going?"

She pulled back, but he held firm. To an outside gaze, they might have been holding hands.

"I'm going home."

"No, you're not. I've called the police, and they should be here soon. I want to clear all this up. Today."

Jess twisted her wrist and slipped from his grasp. For a moment, she thought he might try to grab her again, or even hit her. His face was shiny with sweat, and he was breathing hard. But he didn't move, and Jess knew he wouldn't try to stop her again.

"The police know where to find me," Jess said. She picked up her gear bag with one hand, and with the other —the wrist still smarting —she took the accident report from the table and held it out to him. He didn't take it, so she let the papers fall to the floor.

The heat of the confrontation had subsided, but her fingers were trembling, and her left shoulder was starting to ache. Decompression sickness? Shock? Simple fatigue?

When she turned to shut the door behind her, Paolo was sitting at the table. One of the pages of the accident report stuck out from under his foot, as if a strong breeze might come and blow it away.

#

"You can't go home," George said. He sat next to her in the back seat of the taxi, his sun-spotted hands clenched with worry. "You need to go to the clinic."

Jess didn't reply. The pain in her left shoulder was starting to migrate down her back and arms. A bruise the shape of a half moon was forming on her kneecap, in the place where her knee had connected with the woman's head.

George clapped his hands together. "Jess —I know! I'll listen to the universe tonight. There was a reason for what happened today, I'm sure of it."

Jess was in no mood for George's hippie philosophy. If she let him, he'd probably tell her the woman had died because she'd done something bad in a former life. It was bullshit, all of it. People died. People like that woman. Like her father.

"Not now, George," she said, and something in her tone made him fall silent. He reached out a hand to pat her arm, but she jerked away. Her shoulder protested the movement, and she winced.

"*Mija*, you don't look so hot. You really should —"

"George, you're not my father. Fuck off," she snapped. His mouth closed on whatever he'd been about to say.

The taxi stopped in Sandy Bay to let him out. His house was just visible down the narrow path. It loomed over the beach like an oversized flamingo, the pink wood slats balanced tenuously on wooden stilts.

"Call me. So I know you're still alive," he said simply, and tapped twice on the taxi's roof. The car swerved back out onto the road, and Jess craned her neck to watch

him disappear down the path. His wiry, old man's body was quickly absorbed into the trees.

3

The Paradise Hotel and Restaurant was a graveyard of lost ambition. The front doors of the one-time restaurant had long ago been sealed shut with a rusted metal chain the thickness of Jess' arm. A broken hammock dangled from the weary limbs of a nearby mango tree, and several concrete bricks had been used to prop up the legs of an old picnic table.

"You're back early today," Rosie said. She was sitting in her usual spot by the rear entrance to the common kitchen. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and she flapped a piece of cardboard in front of her face in a makeshift fan.

"Any new guests?" Jess dropped her bag and sat heavily in the wooden patio chair that leaned against the side of the building.

"Yeah, we got a guy in room one. Folks call him *El Doctor*. He stays here from time to time, but you should keep away from that one."

"Why?"

Rosie lowered her voice to a whisper. "Drugs. All the men are in that god-forsaken business now. It's not right. But with things so bad on the mainland, I can't be turning away customers."

Rosie told Jess about all the hotel's guests—it was part of their daily ritual. From Rosie, Jess knew about the prostitute who had stayed for six months, and finally been

kicked out "like the piece of trash she was." Another time, years ago, a man had died in his room. "Stroke, and he was gone just like that. I found that body in the morning. I thought he was sleeping! Not a bad way to go, at that."

Jess smiled at the memory, but she felt her face twist as the pain in her shoulder reasserted itself.

Rosie squinted down at Jess from the open doorway. "Bad day?" she asked.

"Bad day," Jess agreed. She leaned back and closed her eyes. The pain was now a hard, bright seed that burrowed into her shoulder and grew in vine-like tendrils down her arm and into her fingertips. She was careful to keep her face neutral. She wanted to go to her room and lie down, but the thirty feet or so between the kitchen and the rooms seemed a hundred times farther, now. She'd take a break until Rosie went home for the day, then somehow summon the energy to get to her bed. Not to sleep, necessarily. But she needed to get away from people. To think. About her father. About Melissa Anderson, age 27, from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She'd stolen the woman's liability releases and medical forms when she'd been in the shop filing cabinet. They rested in the back pocket of her shorts, folded into a tight, bulky square.

"I got just the thing to cure a bad day," Rosie said. She stepped down from the kitchen and crossed the sand yard to one of the many fruit trees. "The cocoplums is good and ripe," she called. She returned with her arms full of the purplish-white fruit. She let some fall into Jess' lap. They sucked the soft, papery flesh from the fruit before spitting the pits out onto the sand. Jess ate two of them to placate Rosie, then handed the rest back.

"Here, you take the rest," she said. "I'm not hungry."

Rosie frowned. She was a handsome woman in her fifties, with smooth, cocoa-colored skin light enough to let the smattering of freckles on her face shine through. Every day from ten to five, Rosie sat at the door to the common kitchen, waiting for customers, who, for the most part, never came. Since coming to the island two years earlier, Jess had seen only a handful of other guests. Most stayed only a night, and left in the morning, balking at the shabbiness of the rooms, the hefty, twenty-dollar-a-night price tag. Jess' room, on the other hand, cost her two hundred and fifty dollars a month, and consisted of a lumpy queen-sized bed which took up most of the available space, an adjoining bathroom with toilet and electric shower —called a "widowmaker" due to the frequency of electric shocks —and a ceiling fan. The cheapness of her room was attributable to the broken air conditioning unit, which dangled from a hole cut into the side wall. The real selling point for Jess was access to the kitchen —Rosie had given her a key. The shelves still had dust-covered boxes of commercial kitchen equipment, now home to countless mice and roaches. But the gas stove worked, and the fridge was kept clean. When she'd decided to stay on the island, she'd thought about moving to an apartment, but she never had. She loved the hotel, with its sand yard cluttered with rotting mangos and its host of stray cats that hunted the tree-dwelling lizards and wild iguanas. More than anything, she loved the quiet. She could come home from a day's diving and hear nothing but the rustling of the mango trees and the chittering of geckos.

"You look pale," Rosie said. "Maybe you're coming down with something?"

"Must be," Jess said. "I'll take the day off tomorrow." *And every day, after that,* she thought but didn't say.

"That's good." Rosie stood up and massaged her lower back. "It's getting late."

Jess' friendship with Rosie had grown over the course of the past months, although their lives couldn't have been more different. Jess had been a lifelong wanderer, whether she liked it or not, while Rosie had always ached to leave the island and never had. Jess had never seen Rosie's house, or met her family. Asking to do so would have felt like a transgression on the unspoken boundary between guest and manager. Even so, Jess had come to look forward to their afternoon conversations, and the hotel was too quiet on Mondays, Rosie's day off.

Rosie locked up the kitchen and started down the yard to where she'd parked her scooter.

"See you tomorrow," Jess called. She tried to get up from the patio chair. The next thing she knew, she was lying on her side with her face in the sand.

"Jess! Girl, you all right?" Rosie was saying. "Come on, get up now."

Jess let Rosie maneuver her into a seated position with her head bent between her knees. *I must have fainted,* Jess thought, not without amusement. She'd never fainted before, but it was a strange sensation, like fast forwarding ten seconds of your life.

"You need a doctor," Rosie said. "I'll go for Bobby next door. He's got a car. You stay."



Rosie was right, of course —she needed a doctor. The symptoms of decompression sickness would only get worse. Jess' training had drilled this information into her, and yet, still, she resisted. She dreaded the inevitable: doctors, hospitals, the stench of disinfectant, helplessness. Jess had been in the car the day her mother died, but her memories of that time were fragmentary —horror seen through a child's eyes. She'd been crying, and her mother had reached over —to comfort her? to yell at her? —Jess didn't know. In her memory of the event, there is only silence. There must have been a crash, the sound of breaking glass as the other car hit them and forced them off the road. In Jess' memory, the accident plays out like a silent film —a noiseless impact, and a strange, weightless sensation as they fell into the ditch. Jess sees her own tiny hands, floating in the air as if they were under water, and then it is as if the film reel runs out. She has no memory of her mother in the car after the impact. Was there blood? Had she screamed? She had no memory of that or anything in the hours after the accident. She'd been uninjured, safe in her car seat. The driver's side had been smashed beyond recognition.

They'd gone to the hospital, and perhaps Jess' aversion to them started with those unfathomable things seen through a child's eyes: long white corridors, gurneys, wheelchairs, plastic waiting-room chairs. Places where bad news was distributed as easily as paper cups full of pills. Jess' mother had been in a coma three weeks before they pulled the plug. Jess could still smell the disinfectant that did little to cover the odors of her mother's dying body; she could still see the tubes that snaked into her mother's arms and mouth and nose. Her mother no longer her mother but a zombie;

breathing but dead. Her father wouldn't talk about it, but Jess knew he blamed her for being the one who lived.

The pain was getting worse. Jess let her forehead rest on her knees. Deep breaths hurt more, so she concentrated on slow, shallow breaths.

A dusty green passenger sedan pulled up to the kitchen and came to a stop. Bobby popped out of the front seat and jogged over.

"You're okay now, we'll get you to the hospital," he said. Jess extended her right hand and let him pull her up.

"It's all right, I can walk," she said. Rosie and Bobby exchanged worried looks. "Bobby, if you don't mind, take me to the *clínica*, at the Blue Dolphin."

Rosie took in a sharp breath. "You have the dive sickness?"

"It's nothing," Jess said. "You go on home. Bobby will take care of me."

Rosie paused, then relented. "Well, all right. You sure?"

Jess suppressed a sudden impulse to hug the woman. "Rosie, would you mind putting my stuff in my room for me before you go?"

"Of course." Rosie needed both hands to pick up the heavy bag, and she half-carried, half-dragged it across the yard.

"Well, come on," Bobby said. "I'll take you up."

They took off down West End road, each pothole sending spikes of pain through Jess' shoulder and back. Bobby didn't notice her occasional grimaces. He was busy maneuvering around the enormous ruts in the sand road. Most of the dive shops were closed for the day. The air was rich with the smell of tacos and meat kabobs, although

there were only a handful of tourists about. More cops than usual strode along the road, some with large machine guns draped down their blue-uniformed backs.

"Something happen today?" she asked Bobby.

"What, them? Might be a curfew tonight. Zelaya came back. He's hiding in the Brazilian embassy in Teguz now, causing trouble."

Jess had a limited understanding of Honduran politics, but she'd seen images of rioting in Tegucigalpa, of people protesting Zelaya's exile. In the newspapers, Zelaya was a portly, middle-aged man with a bushy mustache. In most stock photos, he wore a white cowboy hat. To islanders like Bobby, mainland politics were irrelevant to the day-to-day workings of island life. But a curfew meant all the bars and restaurants would be closed, and everyone would be sent home. It would be a devastating blow to local businesses, like Bobby's, that depended on tourist dollars for their survival.

Bobby was the proud owner of Bobby's Bar, the last watering hole at the very end of West End. Jess went by most often for a cold Diet Coke with ice, her favorite after-dive indulgence. Bobby was friendly; he never rushed her to make the table available to other patrons, or made her feel unwelcome. After it became clear she wasn't a tourist, he would sometimes grab a Coke himself and join her at one of the plastic picnic tables scattered around the sand. He loved to complain about his kids (he had eight), or his wife (his second) who was always on his back to make the bar more profitable.

"You didn't have to do this," she said.

"It's what anybody do." Bobby careened in a wide swoop around a kid trying to navigate the road on a bicycle. On the main road, the paved road that ran north and south along the length of the island, Bobby took the curves fast, even passing some of the taxis that trolled for fares by honking at the people walking along the weed-choked shoulder.

"You can slow down," Jess said. "I'm not dying."

"Naw, baby, I like to drive fast. My wife don't like it so much, but she's not here, is she?"

He chuckled, and Jess tried to smile. The ache in her shoulder was a now mind-obliterating pulse that made everything else fade to a blur of images: curving road; Bobby smiling out of a dark, sweat-shined face; streaks of grime running down the windows like tear tracks.

It wasn't far to the Blue Dolphin, but to Jess, it was an eternity before Bobby was at last driving down the steep driveway that led to the resort. He parked in the gravel parking lot and came around to help her out.

The resort was huge. No less than ten boats were parked along the long dock in front of the gift shop and cafe that formed the nexus of the resort's activity. Across the cay, an outcropping of land was visible, its surface nearly entirely covered with five-star bungalows and mango trees. There, she knew, people could have the cruise ship experience on land, with buffet meals, excursions, and even a large pool filled with bottleneck dolphins brought in for their tourist enjoyment. To the left of the parking lot sat the clinic, a building that stuck out for its very modern-ness. Its opaque glass doors

were inscribed with fancy lettering, the names of its various doctors and the words "Emergency Clinic" in large silver letters.

Bobby went up and tried the doors. Locked.

"Closed at five," he said. "They got an emergency number there. I'll call."

He took out his cell phone. Jess went back to the car to wait. She left the passenger door open to let in what little breeze there was. The sun was almost gone, but every surface radiated with residual heat. In the parking lot, fluorescent street lights flickered on. Jess traced the contours of light and shadow with her eyes and tried to concentrate on breathing. In, and out. In, and out. *Christ, it hurts.* She then tried to count her breaths, to give herself something to focus on, but the numbers kept slipping away from her.

"Twenty minutes," Bobby said, opening the car door. He leaned down to look at her, his brow furrowed with worry. "You hang in there, all right? The doc is coming."

#

The doctor arrived in a pickup, accompanied by a woman who had to be a nurse. Both wore khakis and pink polo shirts with the name of the resort, along with a logo of a splashing dolphin, over their right breast pockets. The doctor wore a white lab coat over his ensemble, with *Dr. Juan Rodriguez, M.D.*, embroidered in yellow thread on the front. He was a sixty-something Honduran man, and he seemed quite cheerful, despite being called back to work after hours. He was probably thrilled to have another opportunity to use the island's only recompression chamber.

"*Pasa, pasa.*" He waved them inside with an impatient gesture. "You speak Spanish?"

"*Sí,*" Jess said.

"*Bueno.*" He flipped on the light.

The room consisted of a rectangular reception desk, a row of plastic chairs, and the chamber. The capsule-like tube dominated the room. It reminded Jess of an oversized aspirin tablet on metal feet—more like a submarine than a medical device. On the other side of the reception desk was a hallway with doors she guessed led to examination rooms or offices.

Rodriguez retreated into one of the rooms.

"If you're all right now, I got to get home," Bobby said. He stood awkwardly in the doorway, his car keys in his hand.

"Right. Sorry, Bobby. Go home. And thanks."

Bobby smiled. "No problem. You feel better now."

When he was gone, Jess refocused her attention on the doctor, who had emerged from the exam room with tools and paperwork.

He got right to the point, shining a light in her eyes and doing the usual follow-my-finger bit. She could have told him that her decompression sickness wasn't neurological; these bubbles had formed in the joints, not the brain. She could feel them there, like invisible monsters gnawing at her bones. He took a rubber mallet out of his pocket and checked her reflexes, then gestured for the nurse to come over.

"María will check your blood pressure," he said. The nurse took hold of Jess' left arm; Jess winced.

"Use the right," Rodriguez suggested, and the nurse obeyed.

The preliminaries were done, Rodriguez handed her a clipboard with paperwork to fill out. She tried, but her fingers trembled with the effort, her writing illegible. In the end, she dictated her answers to the nurse. Name, age, passport number. For her emergency contact, Jess gave George's name and number.

"Do you want us to call him for you?" the nurse asked.

"No," Jess said, with finality. She could handle this on her own. They went on to the next question on the form.

Rodriguez went to the front of the chamber and examined the gauges that would track internal pressure, carbon dioxide levels, and oxygen flow. On a shelf sat a CB radio and a video monitor. The screen showed what had to be the interior of the chamber—a white room with a mattress for a floor, pillows, and a black oxygen mask reminiscent of a World War II gas mask. After turning a few knobs, Rodriguez flipped through the pages of a clipboard, seeming satisfied. With his lab coat and salt-and-pepper hair, he looked like a Honduran Victor Frankenstein. The nurse handed him the forms, and he asked more questions—how deep had she gone? How fast had she ascended?—and she told him what she had been able to glean from the information stored on her dive computer. Too deep, too long, too fast an ascent. She would need to recompress her body's tissues and shrink the nitrogen bubbles that had formed in her blood; give them time to be reabsorbed.

"Type one," Rodriguez concluded. "You will have one treatment every twenty-four hours until the symptoms are eliminated. We will re-pressurize you to sixty feet, then bring you back up to zero feet, slowly."

"Why sixty feet? I was at a hundred and fifty."

Rodriguez paused, then spoke in the slow, patient tones of a parent talking to an unruly child.

"Pure oxygen becomes toxic below sixty feet. Sixty feet is the maximum pressure. You understand?"

*Of course.* Jess taught people about oxygen saturation in her nitrox courses every day, but her thoughts were muddled by pain.

Rodriguez continued his briefing. "It's like taking a long dive. This session will take approximately two hours and forty-five minutes. You may use the bathroom before we begin."

"Will I have to go to the mainland?"

"No, but if you have American insurance, we can arrange to have you sent to the United States —"

Jess shook her head.

"*Está bien.* We're capable of giving the treatment here."

When she got back from the bathroom, Rodriguez lifted the metal latch to the chamber. The round door slid open, revealing a cylindrical interior space with a cot lining the floor. A second compartment lay deeper inside, separated by another round



door. She was reminded of sci-fi movies where characters crawled through air-locked, white-paneled corridors in outer space.

The compartments were larger than she expected, maybe four feet in height. Big enough to sit up in without hitting her head on the ceiling.

"How many people can you put in here?" Jess asked.

"Four," Rodriguez said. "If they aren't too large. Please go to the end."

"Wait. Can I get something for the pain? My shoulder —"

"No, but I promise, you will feel better as soon as we increase the pressure."

Jess crawled into the second chamber. The nurse had to help her, and at one point, her vision went white again.

"Breathe," the nurse said. "*Estás bien*. Breathe."

Jess breathed. The nurse helped prop her up with pillows, then took a large bag from Rodriguez, most likely filled with emergency medical supplies. Then she picked up the black oxygen mask and slid it over Jess' head until it covered her mouth and nose. Jess could hear a faint hiss as oxygen was pumped into the mask. The air was cool and smelled faintly of rubbing alcohol.

"We have to get a good seal," the nurse said. "Try not to move your face." She was a petite woman, middle-aged, with a carefully-sculpted bob of brunette hair.

She handed Jess a bottle of water. "If you have thirst, you can drink, but don't remove the mask." Oxygen was highly flammable; if it built up in the tiny chamber, it could cause an explosion. "Don't worry," she hurriedly added, as if reading Jess' mind. "The doctor watches the percentage of oxygen from outside."

Rodriguez, still in the first compartment, moved to close the dividing door.

"She's not leaving?" Jess asked.

"No, María must stay. You must be supervised during the treatment," Rodriguez said. "I'll also be watching you, with that camera. See that device there, by your head?" The radio. "Take that, and push the button to speak with me."

He closed the door. Now halved in size, the compartment was claustrophobic, filled as it was with two women and a variety of medical instruments. The nurse had to move aside a pink bedpan, replete with a roll of toilet paper, to make room for herself at the foot of the bed. Jess eyed the bedpan and hoped she could make it three hours without going to the bathroom. *I'd rather die of dehydration than humiliation*, she thought. She set the water bottle aside.

The mask was heavy, and it was hard to move her head. A thick black tube extended down from her face and ran along the side of the chamber and into the floor, where it would be connected to the clinic's oxygen banks.

A crackling sound: static. Rodriguez. "*Señorita* Miller, I'll begin recompression now. Please equalize as necessary, as you do with diving." He sounded far away, as if they were children playing the old game of telephone, the one with two tin cans attached by string.

Jess made the okay-sign to the circular camera affixed to the side of the wall.

"Is it okay if I lie down?" she asked, and Maria moved her legs out of the way so Jess could stretch out. María took a Spanish-language magazine out of her bag and

started to read. The cover had paparazzi photos of various people, none of whom Jess recognized. "With the other woman!" the headline declared in bold yellow ink.

Jess settled back against the pillow and closed her eyes. The pressure rose. She wiggled her jaw, and the air in her ears released. The sensation was nothing like diving. It was more like traveling on a plane, trapped in a confined space with strangers.

As promised, the pain in her shoulder and back eased. The relief was bliss. She sighed audibly as the tightness in her lungs eased. Her mind cleared.

She opened her eyes. On the curving metal ceiling overhead, someone had taped a tourist picture of Half Moon Bay. Blue water and yellow sand; the road — normally bustling with taxis and tourists —strangely devoid of people. The fantasy of paradise: solitary, empty.

The microphone clicked on.

"Better?" Rodriguez said.

"Yes."

"Good. There are one hundred and twenty minutes remaining."

She reached into her pocket and took out the forms she'd taken from the shop. Melissa had answered no to all of the medical questions. She'd been young and healthy, with no idea that her life was about to end. With a fingertip, Jess traced the lines of Melissa's handwriting, over and over. The script was feminine, the l in her name looping down and up into a circle-dotted i.

Eventually, Jess put the forms away and allowed her mind to drift to thoughts of her father. What would he think now, seeing her trapped in this metal tube? Like Paolo,

her father had known that you never leave a soldier behind. She, not Melissa, should have died on the wall today. Melissa had a life, a family. Who was Jess? Nobody. Who would have missed her? Only George, perhaps, and he was already half mad from decades of living alone in his house, listening to the "vibrations of the universe," whatever those were.

Thinking of it, Jess felt a heaviness in her chest unrelated to the bubbles of nitrogen lodged in her blood. It was as if she was still down there, beyond the borders of the wall, the weight of the water overhead like an impenetrable barrier standing between herself and the sky.

4

Jess came to the island two years ago to find George. He was an old flame of her mother's, one of the few people who knew her when she was alive. After college, Jess spent two years working in a title company. For eight hours a day, she photocopied deeds and death certificates off spools of microfiche. She'd lived frugally, saving up for her escape. In her correspondence with George, he'd made Roatan seem a place of fantasy, an earthly utopia. She didn't know what she wanted to do with her life, but the island had seemed a good place to start.

The day she arrived, the ferry from the mainland was chased by a squall. Half the passengers spent the trip bent over the rail. Most of the budget hotels were full, but a passerby on the street told her about the Paradise. She negotiated a week's rent with Rosie, but she had no intention of staying longer. She would learn what she could from

George, then travel south, through the Panama Canal and down into South America. Eventually, she'd run out of money and have to get a job. She thought she might try her hand at a tourist boat, one of the catamarans that ferried snorkelers out to the reef. She'd always liked the water.

Rosie told her how to get to Sandy Bay. Nobody was home when she got to his house, so she slipped a note under the front door.

*Dear George, it's Jess Miller. I decided to take you up on your offer to visit, after all. I'm at the Paradise, Room 8.*

After her mother's death, all her things had gone into a storage unit off Highway 5. Jess found the key as a teenager while snooping in her father's drawers. She copied the key, and throughout her high school years, would periodically take a bus or hitch a ride to the *U-Store-It*.

The dusty interior of the unit stank of decomposing furniture and plastic sheeting. Jess would lift the cover off the plaid sofa and pretend it was the living room of the house they had once lived in. She went through all the cardboard boxes, over and over again. She found Christmas ornaments and cutlery and a metal toaster still in its box. She found her mother's clothes: gauzy peasant-girl dresses and linen blouses with pirate sleeves. She'd put the clothes on over her t-shirt and shorts and flip through yellowed photo albums.

Jess' favorite photo was the one of her parents, together in front of the courthouse, on the day they eloped. Karen Miller wore a short pink dress and held a bouquet of white flowers. Her mother's stomach still looked flat in the photo, but she

would've been three or four months pregnant by then. Jack's large arms were draped around his wife's shoulders, as if saying, *this is mine*. Jess didn't know that happy, smiling man. She knew the other Jack Miller, the one who came after.

It was in one of the unit's old boxes that Jess found the letters from George: twenty-two passionate missives spanning June to August of 1981, the year before her mother and father eloped. Her mother's replies weren't there, but George's apologies — he would pay her back soon, he would take her out for a nice dinner, he would make it up to her — foreshadowed her mother's ultimate decision. Karen Miller was twenty-one at the time, and from what Jess could tell from the letters, George was considerably older, in his forties. A fleeting summer romance: in the end, Karen had chosen the dashing Air Force pilot over the starving artist. The letters had been wrapped in a rubber band and tucked into a sealed Ziploc bag.

Her correspondence with George had started soon after. She'd needed to know more about her mother, and her attempts to get information from her father had been shut down. Her first letter to George was returned with a forwarding address scrawled on the envelope. *Sandy Bay, Islas de la Bahia, Honduras*. She had to look on a map to figure out where the place was. George, it turned out, was an avid letter writer, and he was eager to tell her about his life on the island and his history with her mother. He became a pen pal, and Jess found herself confiding in him about her unhappiness in college, her string of loser boyfriends, her decision to drop out. In return, George told her about her mother.

He'd met Karen in a coffee shop two blocks from Central Park, on a late spring afternoon. She was wearing a polka-dot dress, and she was reading Faulkner. *I told her she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and that she would make me the happiest man on earth if she would take a walk with me in the park. To my utter surprise, she said yes.*

Jess could understand why her mother would be swept off her feet by George. He would've seemed exotic, totally unlike the tame white boys of her Ohio hometown. His mother was Honduran; she'd married an American and moved to the States before he was born. Neither of his parents approved of his decision to pursue an artistic career, and he, like Karen, was forging a path alone through the Big Apple.

Jess' mother was studying theater and dance at NYU when they met. *She wanted to make it on Broadway. She even got a part in some play or other. She only had one line, and we used to joke about it. 'Dinner is ready, sir,' I think it was. Something like that. We'd be at my place, eating takeout Chinese, and she'd say, 'Dinner is ready, sir.' God, she could make you laugh. And she had a great laugh...*

They'd broken up for the usual reasons. *She met your father. I was a nobody then, a too-old, no-good beatnik. I didn't have anything to offer, except my love. But look at what happened! She had you! She was happy! The universe spoke! I cried, when you told me in your letter that she'd died, and in such a tragic way. If she'd waited another year...that's when people started to notice me, started to pay for my work...*

Jess longed to travel back in time and tell her mother to stick it out. It was pleasant to imagine how her own life would've be different if she had. George's stories of

her mother's life made her seem more real, more human. Before George, her mother had been little more than an absence in Jess' life, a hole torn in the fabric of her reality. *Come to Roatan*, George urged, in his letters. *There is more I could tell you about your mother.* The letters got less frequent. The Honduran mail was notoriously bad, and Jess wasn't good about writing back. Even so, she harbored a secret desire to go to the island and visit George. The day after she called her father for the last time —*I don't have a daughter*, he'd said, and hung up —she'd booked the flight.

Eventually, Jess stopped going to the storage unit. It was too much like visiting a museum —a place where the simplest objects of day-to-day life (shoes, plates, glasses) only took on significance after the people who had used them were gone. For her father, she supposed, the unit was a shrine, a reminder of all he had lost.

#

George called the same day she slid the note under his door. He left a message with Rosie: she was to meet him on the beach in front of the Paradise at ten the following morning.

A tropical storm rolled in during the night and washed out the road. The power went out, and most people were holed up with their generators and plastic jugs of bottled water. Few shops were open when she went out to buy water. West End could have been a ghost town. The dive boats were all parked at the docks, covered in tarps to keep out the rain.



Jess was impatient to meet George, but she wondered if he'd still come. The black rain poncho she wore kept out most of the drizzle, but the freshwater runoff reached knee-level in places, soaking her pants and shoes.

George stood shirtless and barefoot at the edge of a half-submerged dock. At first she thought he was wearing some kind of cloak, but as she got closer, she saw it was waist-length silver hair, pasted to his back by moisture. He looked like a one-time hippie, a throwback to a pot-smoking, peace-seeking, love-making age.

"I had a dream about your mother two nights ago," he said when she approached. "She told me you were coming. And here you are." He leaned in and peered at her. His face was brown from sun and creased with smile lines around the eyes and mouth.

"You look just like her, you know. A beautiful woman, your mother."

Jess wanted to say: *I am nothing like my mother*. Her mother had been beautiful, successful. Jess had done nothing but disappoint everyone in her life. Instead, she said, "I brought the letters."

George raised his hands. "The letters! My God!"

"They're in my room. I never thought to ask before, but did you save my mother's letters?"

George's hands fell. "No. I'm sorry. They were . . . lost. With my studio. It all burned down, you see. In 1989. Electrical fire. I wrote about it, in my letters. It's why I came here. I put down the camera and picked up the pen. It was a message." He pointed to the sky.

Jess felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. She'd hoped her mother's letters had survived. Her mother's words, lost forever.

After a pause, she said, "Tell me everything."

"Let's walk."

They made their way up the beach, maneuvering around fallen trees and fresh mounds of uprooted sea grass. A sunken rowboat drifted upside-down in shallow water that was murky with silt. They caught the occasional flash of orange and white — medusa jellyfish, disturbed from their seafloor abode by the surge. It was the first of many walks she would take with George.

George told her many stories about her mother that he had never mentioned in his letters. He told her about the time they got locked on the top of the Empire State Building for hours, because they'd stayed too long and hadn't noticed the elevator was closing. And then there was the time her mother almost joined an experimental performance company, only to learn their main goal was doing LSD and reciting Shakespeare soliloquys in the nude. As he talked, Jess remembered things about her mother that had been long dormant in her memories. Her mother's voice, reading *Goodnight Moon*; the feel of soft fingertips on her forehead, brushing aside her hair. Each story made Jess want to cry and laugh at the same time.

She'd only planned to stay a week on Roatan, but she never seemed to be able to make up her mind to go. One week became two, two became a month. She did her dive training, and got her divemaster certification. She went to Utila for the two-week instructor course, and came back to find work on the island. When she landed the job at

Tropicana, it was the happiest she could ever remember being. Every day, George met her at the rock pile —the dividing line between the wealthier West Bay resorts and the more budget-friendly West End —and walked her the rest of the way to the Paradise Hotel.

He told her more stories about her mother —when she could get him to focus. Sometimes it was hard. He'd get riled up, gesticulating and shouting and going off on tangents. She'd also learned not to interrogate him too much about his book, which he'd been working on for the better part of twenty years. He wouldn't show it to her, but he perpetually claimed it was almost done, and that "a world-famous editor" had offered to publish it as soon as he was ready. She didn't question his claims, or his grandiose self-history. It was enough to have one last link to the family she might have had. In exchange for that, she tolerated his diatribes about the universe, which he claimed spoke only to him.

Seeing them together, islanders would ask about their relationship. Were they father and daughter? Were they lovers? The island thrived on gossip. George was in his late sixties, but Hondurans weren't foreign to the sex trade. Lonely American men often went to impoverished countries to buy young, nubile girls for the "girlfriend experience." Nothing was too shocking to be discussed in great detail. To most islanders, Jess' friendship with George had to be something more, something illicit.

They ignored the island gossip. He started calling her *Mija*: my daughter. Considering his eccentricities, however, it was Jess who, more often than not, was thrust into the role of parent.

The islanders came to accept this arrangement. At the shops, people would sometimes ask her how "her father" was doing, and she'd answer, as if her real father wasn't thousands of miles away, fighting in a war no one understood or cared about.

#

"Rise and shine," George said. His voice was unmistakable even with the microphone's static. Jess woke in the recompression chamber to the nurse sliding the black mask off her face. She must've fallen asleep. The door at the foot of the bed was already open. Her back was stiff and she was exhausted, but the pain was mostly gone.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"*Disculpe*, but you needed someone to take you home," Rodriguez interrupted.

George shook his head. "I knew it was bad, but I wouldn't have left if I knew it was *this* bad. Come on, taxi's outside."

Jess climbed out of the chamber.

"You are now back to zero depth," Rodriguez said. He seemed energetic, despite having spent the better part of the last three hours monitoring her condition. "Your symptoms will most likely return, but they will not be as strong as before. You must return in twenty-four hours, and we will decide if another treatment is necessary."

"Thank you. Both of you," Jess said, including María in her gaze. The woman was already changing the sheets, no doubt getting things in order for the chamber's next unlucky guest. Most came in with Type 2 decompression sickness; lobster divers from the mainland, poverty-stricken men who dived with makeshift equipment in hopes of catching enough spiny lobster to support their families. Those divers were frequently

paralyzed from the neck down, or suffering from a host of other traumatic injuries, many affecting the brain, heart, and lungs.

"*Señorita* Miller will be okay," Rodriguez said to George in thickly-accented English.

"You are father?"

"Depends on who you're talking to," George quipped. Rodriguez' brow furrowed in incomprehension.

It was late, and Jess was still fuzzy-headed from insufficient sleep. "I'll be right back," she said, and went down the hall to the clinic's bathroom. Her shoulder felt better, but she wondered if the symptoms would return again, as Rodriguez had suggested. She'd been lucky.

"Lucky," she whispered at her own reflection. Her fingers traced the pink lines around her nose and mouth, indentations from the oxygen mask. There were dark circles under her eyes, and the features in the mirror looked hollowed out, like the face of a Jack-O-Lantern. She imagined Melissa's face, bloated and decomposing in the water below the wall, her body shrouded in darkness. *I could have saved her*, she thought again, before drying her hands and exiting the room.

5

The cops found her at George's house two days later. A man and a woman in dusty blue uniforms peered with identical expressions of detached fascination at George's stacks of spiral-bound writing notebooks and used paperbacks. Unwashed

dishes filled the kitchen sink, and everything about the interior gave the impression of disarray. George was sitting on a yoga mat on the patio, the tips of each thumb and forefinger pressed together, the backs of his hands perched on the angles of his knees.

The cops introduced themselves and nodded in George's direction. "*¿Qué hace?*" one asked.

"He meditates," Jess said. She ignored the raised eyebrows.

They were polite, but firm. She was to come with them for questioning.

*They must have found the body*, Jess thought.

George's legs unfurled like the wings of an ungainly bird. "I'll come with you," he said.

The male cop gestured for him to sit back down. "*Solo ella.*" Just her.

Jess followed them outside. She'd finished her second treatment the previous day, and Rodriguez had told her she was done. No more diving for at least a year, he'd warned, or she could get bent again. Jess had no immediate desire to dive, but she couldn't imagine never diving again. Where would she find that peace, that sense of belonging?

From the back windows of the police cruiser, the sea appeared and disappeared from view with each bend in the road. She thought of those early, dream-like days on the island, the sheer joy of diving every day. She'd become too complacent. Her days with George had taken on an easy rhythm. But she couldn't afford to stay —Rodriguez' bill had made sure of that. Over four thousand dollars, payable to the Blue Dolphin

Emergency Clinic. She'd maxed out a credit card to pay it. Her rent was due in two weeks. George would lend her what he could, but he wasn't a rich man.

He'd given his statement to the cops the day before.

*What will you tell them?*

*The truth.*

The cops didn't take her to the police station in Coxen Hole, the place for locals who got into trouble. She was a *gringa*, so they took her up the road to a tiny house with the words "POLICÍA DE TURISMO" painted on the front siding. A dried out palm tree leaned against the weathered wooden boards, the once-green paint reduced to peeling strips that dusted the front porch.

As she walked in, she knew she would find no jail cells, no two-way mirror, no bare bulb over a scored metal table. Troublesome tourists were rare, and easily exported. This was the place to file a report for a lost passport, or to report a hotel room that had been broken into. Tourist police were used to dealing with North Americans and Europeans complaining about ruined vacations. Tourists got preferential treatment; after all, they had money.

The cops took her past the reception area (empty), to an office in back, in what might have long ago been one of the house's bedrooms. A desk cluttered with papers, knickknacks, and framed family photos. Two preadolescent boys smiled out of a frame with round, full moon faces. A name card: M. Vásquez. The cops told her to sit and left. A moment later, a man in uniform strode in, a paper cup in one hand. He was slender, with only a slight softening around the middle to demarcate an incipient belly. Dark blue

circles of sweat had formed under the arms of his dress shirt. The room was hot. Sweat dripped under Jess' breasts and down her back. The glass-slatted window was open, but no breeze broke the stupefying heat.

"My name is *Comandante* Vásquez. I'd like to ask you some questions."

Vásquez set down his cup. A dribble of coffee slid over the rim and down onto the stacks of paperwork on his desk.

"You are from America? Where?"

Jess paused. Which state had she lived in the longest? There'd been Maxwell, in Alabama, and the year at Edwards —

"It's not a difficult question," Vásquez said. There was a hardness to his features, an angularity. She'd been raised to trust men in uniform, but she didn't have that security here.

Roatan wasn't the mainland, but corruption existed even in tropical paradise. The locals knew to keep their distance from the cops; it was a side to island life few tourists knew about, or cared to know.

"I'm from California," she finally said.

"And how long have you been on Roatan?"

"A little more than a year."

"*Eres instructora de buceo?*"

"Yes. I was certified at Deep Sea Divers, on Utila."

"*Bueno.*" He tapped his pen against the notebook with a satisfied sound. "Now. Tell me how you met *Señorita* Anderson."



Jess shifted in her chair. Her thighs stuck where they touched the plastic. "I met her yesterday at my job —"

Vásquez scribbled something. "Tropicana Divers, in West Bay?"

Jess nodded. "She signed up for the dive while I was putting tanks on the boat. I didn't have time to speak to her before —"

"Why not?"

Jess' brain, as always, provided phrases in English she could never translate into Spanish. *Because divers like her are a dime-a-dozen. Because I had other things on my mind. Because I didn't care.* That last bit she could translate, if she wanted to. *Porque no me importaba.*

"As I told you. I didn't have time."

More questions. Jess described the dive briefing, their arrival at The Wall, the dive. While she spoke, Vásquez sipped his coffee. At one point, a drop spilled from his mouth and left a dark smear on the front of his shirt.

When Jess got to the current, the accident, Vásquez leaned back and tapped his lip with one finger.

"How strong was the current?"

Jess remembered the weight of it, the pressure of thousands upon thousands of gallons of water. Under the current's implacable force, she had been an insignificant thing, a speck of dust on the edge of a black hole.

"Strong. Too strong. One has to swim well to escape. I didn't know *Señorita* Anderson couldn't swim well." More untranslatable thoughts. The way Melissa had

swum like she was pushing down pedals on a bike. She'd seen an old feminist poster once, somewhere on the web. *A Woman Needs a Man like a Fish Needs a Bicycle*. An image of a fish with legs, trying to ride an old nineteenth-century bike, the kind with one large wheel and one tiny one trailing behind. There'd been something grotesque about the wide-eyed fear in the fish's eyes, the knife-like jut of the spines on its back.

"Why didn't you ask?" Vásquez said.

"Ask what?"

"If she could swim? Is that not part of, what do you call it, *el briefing*?"

"No. We do swim tests in Open Water. She was advanced. She had her card, but maybe she hadn't had it for long."

"You didn't know?"

"No. I wasn't there when she did the paperwork."

"You didn't know," Vásquez repeated.

The questions continued. Sweat oozed from Jess' body. They went around and around like boxers in the ring, always coming back to the same thing. *Why didn't you know?*

"*Entonces*, you were trying to pull the woman up but she couldn't swim, and you let go.

Correct?"

"Yes."

"And the scratches on your face?"

"It was an accident. She was panicking."

"Do you know how she obtained the bruise on her forehead?" Vázquez' eyes drifted down to the bruise on her knee, now a yellow half moon. She could still feel the impact, hear the sound of bone striking bone. A phantom pain that was there and not there. Her own need for self-preservation disgusted her. She knew she should tell the truth, confess that Melissa's death had been her fault, but she didn't. Speaking the words would make it real, and she couldn't yet face, even to herself, the horror of what she'd done.

She looked down at her feet. The floor consisted of an interlocking pattern of pale pink tiles, scuffed with shoe marks.

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"You don't remember." Vázquez leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. "Are you sure?"

"I had —I don't know what you call it in Spanish. *Narcosis*. When you're deep."

That, at least, was the truth. She'd been narc'd enough to consider letting go of everything. Even of life. "We were at a hundred and fifty feet —"

"But you didn't have this *narcosis* before you let her go?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"It appears there is much you don't know. Do you have any other thing to say? I have to speak with the family now."

"They're here? On Roatan?"

Vázquez got up and tossed his empty paper cup into the trash. "The fiancé is here, but he's leaving tomorrow. We're sending *Señorita* Anderson back to her home."

Jess' mind filled in the blanks: *in a coffin*. She knew the commercial airlines sometimes shipped the bodies of foreigners who died. She'd seen one once. The airport employees had placed the coffin on the mechanical ramp, to be absorbed into the cargo hold, like any other piece of luggage.

Another cop came in with paperwork for her to sign. Name. Date of Birth. Place of Birth. Passport number. He gave her a piece of paper.

"*Escribe*," he commanded. "Write everything you remember about what happened."

Jess wrote. When she was done, he brought out a white card with tiny squares. He set it on the table, and opened an ink pad. Fingerprinting. He grabbed each of her fingers by the knuckle and rolled it on the page, one finger per tiny square. He offered her an alcohol wipe for her hands, then made her stand against the wall and took a picture of her face and her knee with a digital camera. Evidence.

Vásquez came back in. "Your father says you live at *El Paradiso*. Is this correct?"

"My father?"

"Señor Jorge Moreno is your father, no?"

"Ye—yes. But he likes to be called George." The words were heavy on her tongue. More lies.

"He is *Hondureño*?"

"He has —" Jess searched for the words — "double nationality."

"I understand," Vásquez said, but his tone was skeptical. He didn't really understand, but Jess didn't argue. "If we have more questions, we will look for you at your hotel."

"I'll be there," Jess said.

Outside, Jess blinked in a brightness that washed all the colors from the world. She scanned the road for a passing bus. George was probably expecting her to call, but she needed time to think. And some sleep. She hadn't been sleeping well since the accident. Too many nightmares. In her dreams, she re-enacted the accident, over and over again, each time, trying to do things differently. She swam harder, or faster, or she inflated her BCD more. No matter what she tried, the dream ended with Melissa's wide, unseeing eyes, falling away into dark water.

"You're Jessica?" a voice behind her said, and somehow even before she turned she knew. Maybe it was the slight tremble in his voice, the way people sound when they're suppressing strong emotions. Bland. Bland the way Melissa had been: crew cut, jeans, sun-burned face, blue eyes.

"My name is Michael Franz. You killed my fiancé." His hands were balled into fists by the sides of his jeans. "She went for a dive. A dive." His voice broke. He was crying, his eyes red-rimmed and furious. He didn't wipe the tears away.

Jess' senses came awake with a jolt. She saw a bus come trundling up the road, kicking up dust; she saw the female cop, one of the pair who had come to get her from George's house, staring from the open doorway below the POLICÍA DE TURISMO sign; she saw the uncomprehending expression of this man who had lost not just his

fiancé but the dream of his whole future life, a life with a two-bedroom starter house and an SUV and two kids playing in the yard. A lifetime of Christmases and anniversaries and petty arguments and make up sex and TV dinners and paying bills and not paying bills. Gone. Because of Jess, and because of a current that had tried to send them all down to the bottom of the sea.

The fiancé took a step forward. Jess flinched, but didn't move away.

"Murderer," he said. The words hit her like a slap.

"Señor Franz, please, this not good. Please. Come with us," the cop was saying in broken English. He tugged the fiancé by the arm.

"Murderer," the grieving man said again. To Jess, the words resonated like sonar pings. *Murderer —Murderer —Murderer*. The man's chin trembled; his head flushed pink all the way to his hairline. Finally, the cop succeeded in pulling him inside.

Jess walked down the road until she was a safe distance away. She sat down on an old stump, the carcass of a mango tree. A bus passed, but she didn't wave it down or stand up. She watched it disappear around a bend in the road, then stared for a long time at the place where it had been.

6

Jess stood at the bar where a black man filled balloons at an oversized metal tank. She set down the empty plastic cup in her hand, her third. Around her, shadowy faces merged with flashing disco lights. Artificial fog hissed into the air; people moved

like wraiths in the chalky clouds. The bar was crowded tonight; so far, the local police hadn't implemented a curfew, and people were taking advantage.

Jess rested her forearms on the bar, then realized her mistake. The bar was coated in a sticky layer of spilled beer. She wiped her arms as best she could on the hem of her shirt.

She handed the bartender forty *lempiras*. He filled a balloon with nitrous, pressing the end closed with two fingers before passing it to her. She put it to her mouth and breathed in. Latex powder left a bitter coating on her lips.

"Hello," she said. She'd expected her voice to sound high-pitched, the way it did when you inhaled helium, but when she spoke, her voice was normal. She inhaled again, this time more deeply, and held her breath. The balloon became a withered thing, like a limp, post-coital penis. She tossed it away.

*A shift.*

Someone was talking from very, very far away. A booming, ethereal sound, like the voice of God in *Moses*, the part where Charlton Heston is told to bring the ten commandments down to his people. But she couldn't understand this voice; language had become a collection of disconnected syllables, meaningless. What was it saying? Her lungs burned.

She exhaled and breathed again. The air was rank with the chemical odors of nitrous oxide, artificial fog, cigarettes, balloons.

"—here for?" A question. The bartender. Had she mistaken him for God?

"What?"

"How long you been here for?" His voice was deep, enriched by the soft accents of island English.

She almost said *I live here*, but changed her mind. She'd chosen a bar away from her usual diver haunts. Tonight, she'd be just another American tourist partying her way through Central America.

"A week," she said. "Leaving tomorrow. Another *Salva*, please."

The bartender put a plastic cup on the counter and filled it from the tap. She drank it in greedy gulps. The beer tasted like water, but she wasn't sure if it was because it was watered down or because she was too drunk to taste it.

"On me," he said. His name was Louis. He had some blow, if she wanted any. He liked Puerto Rican women. They had big, round asses, and they were good in bed. Was she Puerto Rican, by any chance? Gold teeth; a predatory grin. What did she do?

"I'm a student." A relief to be someone else, if only temporarily.

He frowned. "You haven't been here before? You look familiar."

"I get that a lot," Jess said. "Excuse me."

The bathroom was dirty and wet. One stall, no door, no toilet paper.

A tap on her shoulder. "Here, let's help each other."

The woman was French, pretty, with a French-sounding name: Celeste. Right triceps inscribed with bold black letters. *Verité*: Truth.

Celeste stood guard by the door while Jess performed a complex hovering maneuver over the wet toilet seat, then they swapped. As they were rinsing their hands in the sink —no soap, and Jess doubted there had ever been any —another woman



stumbled inside. Jess caught a glimpse of smeared makeup and unfocused eyes as the woman pushed past them into the open stall, where she vomited in loud, liquid coughs.

"*Dégueulasse,*" Celeste said, her lips twisting in disgust. She led Jess out to the dance floor. As they danced, she complained about her boyfriend, who had accused her of cheating on him while she was away traveling. She had to shout to be heard over the music, an endless thumping beat that went on and on and on. It rattled their teeth and eardrums. After a while, Jess could no longer focus on Celeste's words. In the smoke and lights, Celeste's face seemed to melt.

Eyes floated like blue marbles in a puddle of white skin.

They became aware of men's eyes on them, and their dance became more seductive. Jess could feel Celeste's breath on her neck, the clammy touch of her arms as they playacted sexual desire. Faceless men circled with hungry eyes.

Someone handed them fresh beers. Even as she drank them, Jess remained thirsty.

The disco lights made kaleidoscope patterns on the fog and faces and bodies and floor.

*Shift.*

She sat alone at a picnic table in the dark yard behind the bar. Nearby, men stood in smoky circles exchanging baggies of coke; they shook hands and pocketed money and murmured with eyes that darted like cuckoo clocks towards her and away again. The canopy of mango leaves swirled, the world swirling with it, and Jess white-knuckled the picnic bench to keep from falling into outer space.

"*Vente aquí, bonita,*" a man said. He grabbed at her arm, but her body was slick with sweat from the humid air. Fingers slid away without purchase. She needed to find someone — Truth. No, Celeste.

Back on the dance floor, eyes and mouths and bodies and teeth glowed in the purple dark.

"Where have you been, *chérie?*" Celeste was surrounded by a motley crew of admirers and revelers, all in various stages of drunkenness. "Come, this place is finished." And it *was* finished, the dance floor empty, the people dissipating like mirages. The artificial fog had gone, leaving unwelcome clarity in its wake.

Jess followed the drunken tide down the hill to a house where people sat on the floor and on chairs, passing joints and talking in a rainbow of European and North American accents about where they were from and where they'd been and where they were going. The voices overlapped until they became the *wah-wah-wah* of teachers in Peanuts comics. All young, all shouting and squinting the way people did when they were high and saying something profound and forgettable.

Jess took a hit off a joint and let herself sink back into an old, worn couch. She wondered if George would be worried that she hadn't come back from the police station. Voices made a dull roar around her. She saw nothing but the threadbare armrest of the couch. There were stains on the flower print, and the fabric was so threadbare white stuffing was visible. Her universe boiled down to an armrest.

*Shift.*

She was being dragged down the street. Her vision blurred the way it did when you were a child, and you spun and spun and spun until the edges of the world fused and only the circle of ground around your feet remained in focus. Celeste and a smiling boy were leading her down the road, each holding up one side of her body, as if she were Dorothy, and they were walking on yellow brick instead of cracked asphalt.

"Off'n see a wizard," Jess slurred, and they laughed the patronizing way you did to drunk people who had long ago stopped making sense.

"*Oui*, we are going home," Celeste said, but they didn't take her home because Jess didn't know where that place was, and couldn't tell them if she tried. She could go—where? She stumbled and they held her up; her feet dragged, floated, then caught the road again.

*Shift.*

They were lifting her up. She thought of the time she pretended to sleep in the back of the car so her father would have to carry her inside. They'd been going somewhere—where? No matter. She remembered his warm arms lifting, trying not to wake her. Floating, but safe. Protected. Had he resented her, even then?

They placed her in a hammock; the sides rose up around her like a cloth cocoon. She turned her face into the rough material so they wouldn't see the tears on her face.

"You're leaving her here?" said a man's voice. Smiling Boy.

Celeste's voice. "Why not? She looks fine to me."

Jess looked up again, but she saw only stars and the dark triangle of a roof.

Laughter, cigarette smoke. "You know, she killed someone."

"No!"

"Yes. Some kind of dive accident, but everyone is saying it wasn't really an accident. She was sleeping with the boyfriend, or something. Whatever. Come here."

The wet sounds of kissing; more laughter; footsteps; silence.

The human tide had left her behind like the broken fragment of a seashell. Jess shivered as the sweat on her body cooled. *I should go*, she thought, but the slightest movement sent the hammock swaying in a way that curdled her stomach. She settled into stillness, waiting for morning or unconsciousness, or whichever came first. Overhead, the stars wheeled and wheeled—bright and distant and terrible and alone.

#

Jess woke to an old woman poking her with a broom handle.

"*Paga*," the woman said. It took Jess a while to realize that the woman was suggesting she pay for a room if she wanted to sleep there. She was lying in the porch hammock of one of the bungalow hotels that lined the main road, the kind with box-like rooms and mini-fridges and cable TV and Wi-Fi. Luckily, the room Jess had slept in front of had been vacant. Her evening came back to her in fragments, a hodgepodge of images and impressions.

The old woman poked her again.

"*Tranquila*, I'm going," Jess said. She lurched out of the hammock and down the path. She could feel the old woman's disgruntled gaze on her back as she tried not to stumble. The woman muttered something in Spanish that Jess couldn't make out. Her brain wasn't translating Spanish properly, not that she needed to know what the woman

had said. She could guess. She wobbled down West End, somewhere between still drunk and hung over. Saliva pooled under her tongue; she spat on the side of the road and waited, but the desire to vomit passed. She was too light, too empty. Water and food would ground her, tether her to the Earth again.

She went to Lupita's Place. In a more innocent time, before the accident, she'd come here on her odd morning off to sit and read while drinking cup after cup of bitter Honduran coffee. She'd gotten used to the chitter and squawk of the parrots and cockatoos fluttering restlessly in the cages surrounding the open dining area. She liked that the women who worked there didn't seem to notice her at all; she could spend an entire afternoon reading and looking out at the sea from the restaurant's shaded patio, and she was never given any of the usual not-so-subtle cues that she'd overstayed her welcome—a bill placed in front of her on the table, say, or her empty cup cleared away with no offer of a refill.

Jess took a seat at her usual table and ordered a hamburger, fried plantains, an orange Fanta, and two bottles of water. She ignored the annoyed expression of the woman taking her order—*a hamburger at nine in the morning?* They gave her the Fanta and the waters first, then began defrosting hamburger meat in the microwave.

Jess popped the cap on the Fanta and drank. The relief was instant. Nothing had ever tasted so wonderful. She waited impatiently as one of the women rolled the hamburger meat into a patty and placed it in a frying pan. The other woman sliced the green skin off several plantains and diced the white insides into hot oil until they turned golden.

Jess devoured the food as if it had been weeks, rather than hours, since her last meal. It landed with a stabilizing thud in her gut. The world solidified, became less hazy and unreal. She could almost pretend it was like any other day; that tomorrow she'd pick up an Open Water course.

She didn't think anything of the two *guardia* at first. It wasn't unusual for the cops to patrol up and down the beach, especially with what was happening on the mainland. The owners of the big resorts were known to ply the cops with free drinks and food in hopes that the police presence would discourage thieves. But these two stopped when they saw her, and came up into the restaurant where she was sitting. Her stomach clenched.

"Jessica?"

*What did they want now?*

"Are you Jessica Miller?" the cop repeated.

*No. I'm no one. Go away. "Sí."*

"Come with us, please."

"I already talked to the *Comandante* yesterday."

The man's apologetic tone didn't meet his eyes. "Yes, I'm sorry to disturb your breakfast, but you must come now."

She almost expected him to say: You have the right to remain silent. Everything you do . . . except this wasn't America. She didn't think Miranda rights existed here. The strangeness of it was too funny for words. The laughter bubbled up from her lips, and when she looked she saw that they were all staring at her, the women behind the counter

in their grease-spotted aprons, the cops in their drab, sweat-stained uniforms, the tourists who had stopped to observe the commotion. She laughed harder, bent over, feeling tears squeeze from the corners of her eyes. She threw some money on the table and stood up, still laughing. She laughed even as the cops took her arm and led her down the main road to the waiting car.

7

She didn't go to the *Policía de Turismo* this time. The road wound up and over the hills, past the tourist rentals and along the high-fenced borders of banana farms. They took her to Coxen Hole, to a squat, concrete building with barred windows. She'd never noticed it before, in all her long walks through the markets. It was off in a part of town she rarely saw. The building looked more like a bank or residence than a jail. She guessed it was mostly a stopping place. Real criminals got sent to the mainland. In front of the building, people passed by, going about their daily lives. An elderly black man walked a bicycle, his basket loaded with plastic grocery bags. A woman strolled by, a child in one hand and another strapped to her back. A group of girls in knee-length pleated skirts and white dress shirts passed on their way to school.

The cops took her inside the building, to a reception area where she was told to empty her pockets. The cop behind the desk put everything into a used plastic bag. There were forms to sign, with boxes for her to write her name, her place of birth, her age. In the waiting area, everyone stared.

"Mama, why is the *gringa* here?" a young boy asked, and was quickly hushed by his mother. The mother didn't meet Jess' gaze, but the boy stuck a dirt-encrusted thumb in his mouth and watched her with round, fascinated eyes.

She was taken past a metal gate into a hallway with three cells. Concrete walls, concrete floor.

"Ay, *mami*, come here *guapa*," one of the men called.

"*Cállate, estúpido*," chastised another.

The cops opened the door to the first cell. Six men sat on the floor or on narrow benches along either wall. The room stank of urine. A metal toilet sat at the back of the room, encrusted with grime.

"*Espera*, I'm going in there? With the men?" she asked, incredulous.

The cop shoved her inside and locked the door. "Not laughing now," he said, and disappeared down the length of the hall.

Jess took a seat closest to the metal bars. She felt like a cornered animal.

The one who had catcalled her was a bearded man who stank of beer. He was sitting on the floor by the toilet, and Jess noticed with no small amount of relief that he was too drunk to do anything but shout offensive come-ons. The room reeked of male body odor. A few of the men were young and fit, with muscles straining out of T-Shirts with American logos. They wore doo-rags on their heads or had tattoos on their necks. The others were older, thinner and more worn down by life. They had bent backs and brown skin crevassed from sun exposure. All the men smiled in surprised delight at the appearance of a *gringa* in their midst.



"Where do you come from, *señorita*?" one of the men asked.

"I don't speak Spanish," she said in English, and turned her back to them. She wondered what she would do if they tried to assault her. Her fingers curled inwards into claws. Go for the eyes, she supposed. Then maybe a knee to the balls.

"Eh, I think this is the *gringa* that killed somebody the other day."

"Her? She doesn't look like she could kill a fly."

"I like my women dangerous."

"Is that why you run away from your wife every morning?" The men laughed.

As they talked, some of Jess' tension eased. Her fingers uncurled. She supposed she should be terrified —she was outnumbered and alone, and the shadow of rape hung over every woman. Walking alone after dark? *You could be raped*. Traveling alone? *You could be raped*. All the movies and television she'd ever seen warned of this. Now she was trapped in a confined space with six men, and she knew she should be afraid, but, incredibly, she wasn't.

These were far from the hardened criminals on late-night TV shows about U.S. prisons. These gazes were curious and amused —almost friendly. Not the threatening leer of would-be rapists, as far as she could tell. Most of these men were Spanish-speaking Hondurans, and after insisting on her lack of Spanish several times, they gave up and began talking amongst themselves. They spent most of the time complaining about the heat, the stench, or the long wait for release.

Jess had asked Bobby about crime on the island once. He'd insisted that the police were far more dangerous than the average island criminal. Most people who spent

a night in Roatan Jail did so for drug-related offenses. The drug trade was a major industry in the Bay Islands, situated as they were halfway between South America and the United States. A two-prop plane en route from Columbia had once crashed here, dumping over a ton of cocaine into the jungle. People had joked for weeks about snow in the tropics. According to Bobby, most men who were arrested were released within twenty-four hours, and even sooner if they paid off the cops. Even so, it didn't do to get arrested too often; repeat offenders had a way of "disappearing" from police custody.

One man scooted down the opposite bench to face her.

"I am called Nacho," he said. "I speak English. A little."

He smiled, revealing a gap where his front teeth should have been. He was a scrawny man, no more than five feet tall. His body was hard and lean, too thin, his brown skin prematurely aged by hard labor. He could have been thirty, but he looked fifty-five.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"California." This elicited impressed *oohs* from the men in the cell, many of whom, she now learned, spoke more English than they let on.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!" Nacho exclaimed. "You surfing?"

"No," Jess said, unable to keep herself from smiling. "No, I don't live near the ocean. Far."

"*Qué pena*," Nacho lamented. "Ocean is beautiful! We have much ocean here. But no wave for the surfing."

The guard returned and slid open the cell door.

"*Tú,*" he ordered, pointing to Jess. "*Ven.*"

She followed him out the door and down the narrow hallway. Behind her, the men shouted catcalls or questions, but the guard ignored them. They passed a second cell, about half the size of the one containing the men. This one was marked *Jovenes*. Juveniles. It was empty. The next cell was no more than eight feet in length. No sign, but Jess guessed it was for prisoners who needed to be kept in isolation. Which was her, apparently.

The guard nudged her inside and shut the door. A mattress on the concrete floor took up most of the space. Jess reached out, and she could touch the walls on either side. The cell was about the size of a walk-in closet in the States. In the back, a concrete partition only partially hid a toilet from view. A towel had been draped over the opening—some previous resident's attempt at modesty. A ring of grime circled the walls at knee level, and the concrete was scored with carved initials and crude drawings. A cross, with the Lord's Prayer etched above it in Spanish. *Padre Nuestro, que estás en los cielos . . .* There was no window, and no light except for that which filtered in from the hallway outside the barred door.

The hoots of the men continued for while, then settled down again. She heard the murmurs of their conversation. She pressed her face into the bars. A guard had been stationed near the entrance to her cell, at a desk. He was reading a newspaper. On the cover was an image of people with bandanas over their faces running from clouds of tear gas. On the upper left corner, a picture of Zelaya, his mustachioed mouth open as if shouting a warning.

Eventually, Jess' legs and back complained, and she sat on the mattress. It was thin, and didn't help to ease the unyielding hardness of the floor. She leaned her back against the wall.

The ring around the walls, explained. The marks of hundreds, if not thousands, of backs. She picked at her fingernails and worried the ragged edges. She tried to sing to herself, but she'd forget the lyrics. Her voice trailed off. After a while, she stood and shook the pins and needles from her legs.

She picked up the mattress to drape it over the concrete partition, and dropped it, yelping, when a cockroach scuttled out from underneath. She picked the mattress back up and draped it again. This time, nothing moved. She paced. Five steps up, five steps back. She had to use the toilet, but she waited as long as she could, until her bladder ached. She had to take down the mattress temporarily to get into the toilet, and the towel over the partition provided little in the way of privacy. She made sure the guard wasn't looking her direction and peed faster than she ever had in her life. No toilet paper.

To pass the time, she replayed old movies in her head. As before, her thoughts trailed off. The concrete around her numbed everything. She thought of the punishments she'd received as a child, when she'd failed to keep her room clean or do her chores. Her father's voice, harsh but slurred from the scotch he drank after working hours. *Kneel*, he'd say. *That's an order*.

Base housing had cheap tile floors, the kind most often seen in hospitals or office buildings. Never carpet. It wouldn't take long for the coldness of the tiles to penetrate her knees. A coolness replaced by pain as her knees were crushed —slowly, inexorably —by

her own weight. The pain would travel up her legs and into her lower back. She knew better than to slouch, or stand up. Or even worse: to beg to stand up. Her father sat at the table, drank, and read the newspaper. He had to read the newspaper all the way through before she could stand. Even the classifieds.

*I hope you understand why I've had to punish you,* he'd say, folding the newspaper and placing it on the table. *Dismissed.*

It was best not to stand immediately. She'd collapse to the side like a puppet with cut strings and wait for circulation to return. For the circles of red, compressed skin to fade from her knees. Then she'd go into her room, and not come out again that night.

Roatan Jail was worse than her father's punishments. She'd only been here a couple of hours, but already she thought she might go mad. She didn't want to think about the dive. It had been nearly a week, but time had done nothing to ease her guilt. *I should have done something. I could have done something.* The images came quicker than she could banish them away. Again, she saw herself let go of the tank valve, saw the shock and fear in Melissa's eyes. The realization that Jess wasn't going to save her. Jess imagined Melissa Anderson's face, drifting in the dark, nibbled on by fish, her mouth open in a silent scream. She leapt up from the mattress and paced the room again. She memorized the Lord's Prayer on the wall and repeated it over and over.

*Padre nuestro . . . Venga tu reino . . . en la tierra como en el cielo...libranos del malo...*

She repeated the words in fast succession, until they blended together and all meaning was lost.

*Padrenuestroqueestáenloscielossanctificadoseasunombre*

The words held no comfort. They were not her words, not her language.

She became aware that she was ravenously hungry. She peered through the bars.

The guard was still there.

"*Disculpe*, but do we get any food here?"

The man shook his head. "Visiting hours are finished for today. Your family can bring you food tomorrow."

Would George know to bring her food in the morning? She hoped so.

"Are you bringing the *gringa* food?" the men called.

"Bring us some."

"I'm huuuuuuungry!"

"*Cállense*," the guard said. He stood and moved beyond Jess' field of vision.

There was a banging sound, then silence. The men were quiet.

No food, then. This wasn't an American prison. No cable TV here, no trays laden with tater tots and baloney sandwiches. Nothing but concrete walls and her own thoughts. In the toilet vestibule was a sink. She gulped water from the tap, trying to make her stomach feel full, to still the rumblings inside herself. She didn't know if the water was safe to drink, but she didn't have a choice. Hours ago, she would have thought nothing of opening a cold bottle of water. Now, even the most mundane aspects of her former life became precious.

The cells got darker. The guard outside her door changed. The new guard propped his feet up on the desk and fell asleep. A yellow light lit up above his head,

bleeding yellow into the entrance to the cells. The rest of the cell remained dark. When Jess had to pee again, she had to stumble blindly, hoping she wouldn't fall. She recalled someone telling her once that roaches were nocturnal. She tried not to touch the walls. She put the mattress back on the ground, closest to the yellow light. Her eyes had adjusted, but she could only barely make out the slumped form of the guard. He was snoring, his breath going in and out with soft, regular wheezes. Her stomach growled. Sleep was an impossible prospect. The men in the cell down the hall were silent. They must have been sleeping, but she couldn't hear their snores.

"Eh! *Californiana. Estás allí?* It is me. Nacho. Put arm like this, *así.*" He'd stretched his arm through the bars and out, until it lay flat on the hallway floor.

"What?" she whispered.

"Try, try," he insisted.

The man seemed harmless enough. She lay down on the mattress and put her arm out.

"Okay?"

"Okay." The sound of something rolling on the floor. An object, cool and hard, connected with her forearm. She curled her hand inward, and pulled the object through the bars and towards her face. Waxy, soft. The sweet, familiar smell of apple. In the yellow light, the apple looked black, but she knew it had to be red. It was overripe, with concavities on its surface like meteor craters.

"You like?" Nacho whispered.

"Yes! Thank you!"

She went back to the tiny sink and rinsed the apple. She intended to take small bites, but the sweetness of it destroyed any impulse control she may have had. She ate all of it, even the bruised, too-soft sections. The innards of the core scratched her throat as they went down, but she didn't care. She could have eaten a dozen apples.

"They are *pendejos* here," Nacho said. He kept his voice low to avoid waking the others. "No food. Visiting hours every day in the morning and at night, and my wife has to bring me food or I starve. You know, I have see no *gringa* here before. Man come here some time, but no woman. You have money? If you have money, they will let you go."

She didn't have money, but to someone like Nacho, she was rich. For Nacho, California was the stuff of dreams, a site of white-toothed surfer chicks and Beverly Hills mansions.

"I don't have as much money as the tourists," she said, cautiously.

"I am a rich man," he said, and paused for effect. "What, you no believe? I have three sons. Strong sons. I am rich. You have children?"

"No."

"You have how many years?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Twenty-eight! Young! If I you husband, you have much children!"

"I'm sure I would," she said with a laugh.

Jess had never wanted children, but she didn't want to offend Nacho by telling him this. Even in the States, saying you didn't want children was like admitting you'd



failed to pass some intrinsic rite-of-passage of womanhood. She'd never regretted becoming a divemaster or an instructor. Most of the other instructors on the island were men in their thirties or forties. It was somehow more acceptable for them to be unmarried and childless, living the Peter Pan dream in an island paradise. The female instructors she met were typically young and pretty, bait to bring in male clientele. At some point, most of them packed their bags and went home to get married, and left the dive life behind.

"Why are you here, *Californiana*?" Strange American.

"On Roatan?"

"No, no. *Here*. With me. In this —how you say, *agujero del infierno*. This bad place."

*Agujero del infierno*. Hell hole. "There was an accident. It was my—they think it was my fault."

"The person dies?"

"Yes."

"Then it is very sad. I will say a prayer for this person. You are Catholic?"

"No."

"Ah. I will say a prayer for you also."

Jess heard whispered murmurs, catching only a few words here and there: *María*, *José*, *bendiga*. As he spoke, her eyes traced the dark patches on the wall of her cell where the Lord's Prayer was now shrouded from view. Her father had been raised Baptist, but had never spoken of his childhood. "Empty rituals," was all he would say on

the subject. There was nothing after you died, he told her. You died, and there was darkness. The person you'd been was gone. Even as a child, this thought had filled Jess with horror. After becoming a diver, she'd found she disagreed with her father's existentialism. In the darkness of the deep sea, even the emptiness was filled with life. Diving sometimes felt like she was trespassing on something sacred.

She had no desire to sleep, and fortunately, Nacho was eager to talk. He told her about his children. He had seven children, five boys and two girls. He was a fisherman by trade. He'd grown up by the sea. But the fishing hadn't been good in recent years. He'd taken up a variety of jobs to make ends meet: mostly construction, helping build condominiums for rich Americans. It was hard, sweaty work, and he barely made enough to feed his family. He was gone all day, and his wife got bored and started looking at other men. She was difficult, he said, but he loved her.

"I miss the sea," he said. "Sometimes I catch many fish; I make good money from the *gringos*. It is not the same, working, how you say it, construction. When I can, I borrow boat from friend, go fish. It is not enough."

One day, Nacho was out, far out at sea, when a whale shark came up to the boat and looked him in the eye. The biggest fish he had ever seen, many times larger than his boat. Beautiful, with eyes like a person's, like a man's. He didn't know why the whale shark came, but his arrival brought many fish that were running away. It was like a blessing from God. Nacho might have tried to catch the whale shark, too, but his boat was not big enough. It was just as well. It is bad luck to kill something with eyes like a man's. Did she understand?

She did. Once, while diving at Lighthouse, she had come across a nurse shark, sleeping in the sand. Her dive students had shied away from the shark, despite her assurances that this was a reef shark, harmless to humans. She crept forward, slowly, until she was a couple of feet from the shark, her knees resting in the sand. The shark looked at her, and she could swear she saw intelligence in those black eyes. The gills on the side of its head opened and closed with each watery breath, and she thought, *what odd, unwelcome creatures we must be to them*. There was a tense awareness in its not-quite-sleep. Its eyes were open, its body ready to take flight at a moment's notice. Quietly, without disturbing it, she'd moved away, and rejoined her divers. She couldn't articulate all these thoughts to Nacho in simple English, but he seemed to understand.

"Nacho, how long have you been here?"

"Oh, I come yesterday! They not suppose to hold more than twenty-four hour, but sometime, they do. You will go soon, I think."

*Because I'm a rich foreigner.* It was the truth; it didn't need saying.

"And you? What did you do?"

"I stabbed a man who tried to touch my wife. Ay, I'm a stupid man. Too jealous! But no worry, I only stab him in the leg. I try other place, but I miss."

Jess covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

"Good night, *Californiana*."

"Good night."

Throughout the rest of her long, sleepless night in Roatan Jail, Jess stared at the pattern of intersecting boxes where the square shape of the bars met their shadows in the

yellow light. She traced the hard edges of the boxes with her mind; they seemed like Russian dolls, each box hiding another, and another, and another.

#

George didn't come in the morning with the other family members that crowded into the narrow hall. Mostly women; no children. They brought plastic containers that smelled of Honduran cooking: rice, beans, fried plantains. Jess could almost taste the grease. She felt guilty for her hunger, for eyeing the food of the men and wanting to rip it from their hands. The women came, one by one, allowed to talk to their family member for half an hour before being sent on their way again, empty bowls in their hands. Most stared at Jess as she stared at them. Unabashed curiosity on all sides, the way she imagined zoo animals might examine each other from between the bars of their compounds.

One of the women said something to the guard and approached Jess' cell. She handed Jess a half-empty container. Inside was a single *baleada*, a tortilla filled with beans and powdered cheese.

"My husband say —give," the woman said in English. She was a curvy woman with streaks of gray in her silky black hair. Still, her round face was pretty; she wore mascara and lipstick, and she was dressed in jeans and a frilly blouse that showed off her cleavage.

They sized each other up. Jess had never been considered pretty. She knew her features were a little too angular, her jaw almost masculine in shape. Her skin had been tanned by the sun and further marred by constellations of freckles. She rarely wore

makeup, and she kept her brown hair cut short to just below her ears. Their assessment of each other passed in an instant, but Jess could tell her appearance set the woman at ease. It helped that Jess hadn't had a proper shower or a change of clothes in days.

Jess ate the *baleada* in three quick bites, and handed back the container.

She thanked the woman, who gave a quick nod of acknowledgement and went back to the men's cell. Seen together, they were a veritable odd couple —Nacho short and skeletal, his wife broad-hipped and voluptuous. Jess tried to imagine them in bed together—he'd be smothered!—then chastised herself for her unkind thoughts.

After the visitors left, the men joked that Nacho was such a playboy his wife didn't mind him talking to other women. They clapped him on the back, and he, still smiling, told them to fuck off.

Jess was released in the late afternoon.

"Nice to meet you!" Nacho called as she was led away.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that it wasn't how you said goodbye.

#

She collected her things at the front desk. All the money had been removed from the bag. From the clerk's hostile expression, Jess knew complaining about the theft wouldn't do her any good. Well, she didn't care about the money; they could have it. At least her beat up dive computer —of use to her now only as a wristwatch —was still there.

George was waiting outside, frantic with worry. He gave her a hug, his body trembling slightly.

"Are you all right? I've heard it's horrible in there. Did they hurt you?"

She grabbed his fingers and squeezed. "I'm fine. They took my money, but there wasn't much of that to begin with."

"I came as soon as I heard. I made a deal with them to have you transferred to a private cell. Did they do it?"

"Yes. I'm okay. Hungry, but okay. Really."

"They didn't feed you? That's ridiculous." He sniffed, and seemed to get himself under control. "Come on, I'll take you back to my place."

"No. I want to go home. But can I borrow ten bucks? I'm going to grab some food on the way."

8

Sunset Bar was mostly deserted when she arrived. It was early; by six o' clock, the place would be mobbed with instructors and divemasters seeking beer and sustenance after the day's dives. All around the bar, cheerful dive slogans had been painted or chalked onto the wood planks that made up the walls. "Take only pictures, leave only bubbles . . . AND TIPS" one sign proclaimed, above a glass tip jar.

Jess ordered a burger and fries to go, and sat down at one of the wooden bar stools to wait.

On the way back to West End, George had told her that she never would have been arrested in the first place if Melissa Anderson's family hadn't put pressure on Vásquez.

*Circumstantial evidence at best, Mija, he'd said. After I threatened to call the U.S. Embassy, hell, the entire goddamn American media, they decided it would be better to cut you loose.*

The Honduran government's reluctance to get involved wouldn't stop the family from suing the dive shop for wrongful death; the shop could lose their professional rating with PADI, which would be the kiss of death to their dive operation. From what she'd been able to glean from George, Melissa Anderson's death had been determined to be an accident. Witnesses had backed up her claims about the strong current, and George had told them everything he'd seen. Jess trying to pull Melissa up; the woman panicking. Jess' struggle to get free, to escape. Had he also seen Melissa drop down into the abyss? Jess didn't know, and didn't want to know, but the thoughts still came. Had Melissa woken up, in the end? Had she screamed?

With the Honduran courts washing their hands of Jess and the whole affair, there wouldn't be much the family could do beyond sue the dive shop and file a complaint. PADI could very well decide to rescind Jess' instructor card, but at the moment, she didn't care if she never went diving again. That part of her life felt over and done. *Let them take my card, Jess thought. Or better yet, I'll burn it myself, next chance I get.*

"What are you still doing here?" a familiar, Italian-accented voice said. "I thought you would have left the island by now."

The woman who approached could have passed for a model, if not for the aquiline nose that was too long for her face.

*Fuck.* " I don't work for you any more, Federica."

"You'll never work anywhere. Everyone knows what you did. *Everyone*. So why don't you go back to America where you belong?"

Federica's smile was tight and cruel. Like many of the girls Jess had known in high school, Federica believed that because she was beautiful, she could treat other people like shit.

"Leave me alone."

Federica took a step closer and shoved at Jess' arm. "Why are you still here? Just. Go." Each word was accompanied by a shove. Jess nearly lost her balance and fell from the bar stool.

The woman's sharp fingernails poked into Jess' chest, pushing, prodding.

Something in Jess snapped. A blind rage washed over her. An instant later, Federica was on the ground, screaming bloody murder and clutching the back of her head.

"—trying to kill me, too, you crazy bitch!" she shouted. Bar patrons took her by the arms to help her up. Others stood between the two women, arms extended at Jess as if to hold her back. Their precautions were unnecessary. The rage drained away, and images from the last few minutes flashed through her brain with the odd clarity of an instant replay. She'd pushed Federica. Hard. There'd been a satisfying thwacking sound as Federica's head hit the boards. And she'd been *pleased*. In that moment, she'd wanted to kill her, to rip out her throat, to stomp her into the ground.

She was angry, but she knew it was more than Federica's bitchiness that had triggered her. She was angry at her mother for dying so young, angry at her father for his



resentment. And now her rage had nowhere to go; diving had leveled her out, but that was gone. She heard that pinging sound again, the voice of Melissa's fiancé. *Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.*

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

"I'm sorry," Jess said. "I —"

"Fuck your sorry," Federica said. Someone had given her a bag of ice, and she held it to her head as she walked away.

The bartender shoved a grease-stained bag into Jess' hands. "That'll be ten. Don't come back. You're not welcome here any more."

Jess took out the money George had given her and set it on the counter. All conversation in the bar had ceased. Jess took the bag, clutched it to her chest, and walked away.

#

When she was nearly home, green-uniformed *guardias civiles* appeared and began shouting orders at everyone.

"*Toque de queda,*" they shouted. Curfew. Six o' clock. People scurried like ants disturbed by an errant footstep. Most rushed to the shops for last-minute purchases. Those tourists who remained on the island retreated to their air-conditioned bungalows with six-packs of beer cradled under their arms.

At the hotel, the kitchen was closed and locked. Rosie had gone home early.

Jess ate the now-cold burger and fries on her bed. The grease had a soporific effect, and she fell asleep without bothering to take off her clothes. In her dreams, she re-

played the accident over and over, each time with the belief that, this time, Melissa wouldn't die. This time, she would swim hard enough, be strong enough. But, in the end, she always let go. The dreams ended with Melissa's face, her mouth open as she dropped down and down.

#

Jess woke drenched in sweat and disoriented. Her lips tasted of saltwater. She wiped her face dry with her shirt sleeve and sat up. The humid air pressed in. She fumbled for the light switch, and the bulb filled the room with a sickly amber glow. Her computer told her it was past ten. Sunday; she should have been hearing the boomba-boomba of Latin music echoing across the water as Bobby's Sunday barbecue kicked into high gear. Instead, the world was eerily quiet. The curfew. There would be no music or dancing tonight.

Jess took off her clothes and went into the tile-lined shower. The hot water heater was broken again, but the cistern water was still warm from the day's sun. She scrubbed until her skin was pink and raw, as if it were possible to wash away everything that had happened.

She got dressed and went outside. On the patio, the air was cool, rich with the combined smells of rotting mangoes and wet sand. A man —*how long had he been there?*—was smoking in front of room one. She saw the glow of his cigarette first; then his eyes, watching her.

Right. Rosie had said there was another guest.

"You must be *El Doctor*," she said. Strange shadows danced on the wall behind him. The orange porch light on the wall crawled with moving, fluttering things. A mosquito buzzed past her ear, and she swatted it away.

"My reputation precedes me," he said.

"Not really. Rosie mentioned you."

He ran a hand along his shaved head. She could make out an inky splotch behind one ear, a tattoo of an animal of some sort. A tiger, or maybe a bear. He looked Honduran, but his accent was crisp, British-influenced. She guessed he'd lived abroad, or been educated in a British school. She didn't ask. She'd lost count of the times she'd been told *how well you speak Spanish!*, always with the surprise, the not-so-subtle questions about her parents, about her nationality. She supposed people like her, and maybe like *El Doctor*, presented an unsolvable puzzle to the world.

*El Doctor* took a deep drag off his cigarette, then flicked ash down onto the sand. His fingers were long and slender. An artist's hands.

"Only good things, I hope. Come, join me." He patted the weathered boards next to him. "I'm celebrating."

"What's the occasion?"

"Who needs one?" he declared.

Jess kicked off her shoes and joined him. He lit a cigarette and passed it to her. It had been a long time since she'd smoked. Nearly every divemaster or instructor she knew was a smoker; ironic, when you considered how much their sport depended on lung capacity.

"So, do you have a real name, or should I just call you *El Doctor*?"

He laughed, flicking his cigarette butt away, the orange glow of the lit end arcing onto the sand. "Name's Mateo. *El Doctor*'s a nickname. Long story." He was older than her, maybe thirty-five. The skin around his eyes creased, fan-like, when he smiled.

"I've got time," she said.

"It's not so exciting as you might suppose. I have a reputation for helping people out, when they need something done," he said. "Fixing things, as it were."

"Such as?"

"Tourist visas. That sort of thing."

Jess hadn't heard of *El Doctor*, but she was well aware of this common method for sidestepping the rule that limited tourist visas to 90 days. Two hundred dollars could buy you a stamp that said you'd left the country and come back in again. Jess had done it herself, as had nearly every other expat on the island.

She told him her name. His expression didn't change, and she felt some of her tension subside. Tonight, she could be anonymous.

"Beer?"

"Sure."

He retreated into his room, and she saw through the crack in the door an open backpack and clothes piled on top of the bed and table. He came out with two open bottles of *Imperial*. She took a sip and winced.

"Sorry, did I forget to mention they're warm?" he said.

"They really need to get mini-fridges for these rooms."

He took a sip. "Yeah. It's like drinking piss." His was tone matter-of-fact. "I could roll us a joint instead?"

Jess assented, and he went back into his room. She heard him rummaging through his bag, zippers opening and closing.

He came back out and set a tin box between his knees. It contained a hand grinder, a couple of clumps of loose weed, rolling papers, Bic lighters. She'd seen that kind of hand grinder before, a circular wooden box with metal pins inside. He put the weed in and closed the box, turning the top and bottom of the box in different directions to grind up the weed. His long, narrow fingers moved in slow, unhurried gestures that spoke of years of repetition. With meticulous care, he plucked out any unwanted stems and seeds and tossed them onto the ground. There was an art to this work.

Weed never affected her much, but she hoped this time would be different. She craved forgetfulness.

Mateo stuck out his tongue and licked a line along the paper's edge, then rolled the joint closed. He lit it, and for a long while they sat smoking without speaking, passing the joint between them as they watched the night-dark yard and the glimmer of light on water through the window-like gap between the mango trees.

They began to talk, the aimless chatter of the stoned. They talked about superficial things, about the cruise-shippers, about the political unrest on the mainland, about the best—and worst-restaurants in West End.

"Are you from Roatan?"

"No. I was born in Teguz, but traveled around a lot. My father was an exporter. I came here about five years ago."

Jess was intentionally vague about her work on the island, and she said nothing about the incident with Melissa, or her present unemployment. Mateo, also, was evasive about certain topics. *Drugs*, Rosie had said, but Jess didn't care about his secrets —she had her own to keep. She didn't want to know what he'd done to put those introspective lines on his face. Recent events had also inscribed themselves on Jess' body; they were evident in the fatigue that slumped her shoulders and in the deep circles under her eyes.

As they spoke, Jess felt a languor creep into her limbs and thoughts. She was high, higher than she'd ever been in her life. This kind of smoking was dangerous, because it created a sense of peace that was almost as addictive as her love of the sea.

Time slowed down. She thought she should wake up, and she suddenly remembered her father's way of waking her up for school, in the days before he began flying back-to-back missions. He'd add words to the Reveille song, the song trumpeted each morning at sunrise to signal morning on military bases. "It's time to get up, it's time to get up, it's time to get up in the mooorning," he'd call, then toot the rest of the song through his closed fist. As a child, she'd loved those times when he took her out of boarding school and let her stay with him. Even when he was gone, she'd wait with eager anticipation for his care packages. Every month or so, a box would arrive, with a Japanese kimono, or a bamboo box from the Philippines. It wasn't until she was older that she saw his gifts as insufficient replacements for kindness, or for actually being a part of her life.

A hand gripped hers. Artist's hands. *El Doctor*. The hands were warm and reassuring. She didn't resist him as he pulled her closer. His lips were cool and moist, and they didn't insist. They were questioning lips; they asked for permission. Her lips responded with *yes*. The joint was gone. They went inside his room, and Jess let his hands roll over her like a wave, felt herself giving in to the self-obliteration of existing only as flesh. His artist's hands painted slow curving lines across her breasts and inside her body. He made love the way he rolled joints, with a slow precision. Her buzzing thoughts faded, until they were only a whisper, a slow current moving in deeper water, far below.

At some point in the night, it started to rain.

#

At dawn, she woke and carefully lifted Mateo's arm from her breasts. She got dressed quietly and slipped from the room, careful not to wake him. Beyond the crumbling façade of the kitchen, she caught glimpses of the sea, its waters wave-less and still.

She put on her bathing suit and went out to the beach. The sand was still wet from the previous night's rain, and the shallows were cloudy with stirred-up sand. The water was warm, silky. She'd brought her spare mask —her good one had been lost — and as she swam further out the silt cleared and she could see the bottom, a trough of white sand populated only by the flower-like tentacles of upside-down jellyfish and the slow-moving shells of wandering conchs. She reached the reef as the full circle of the sun crested the horizon. Below, the reef fish were stirring, while the creatures of the

night —the octopi and lobsters and eels —retreated into their crevasses to wait out the day. A part of her craved depth, but she resisted the impulse to dive down, to see what else lived beneath the surface. She swam until her fingers and toes were wrinkled with artificial age. To the north, dark clouds were massing, with the occasional lightning flash. Another storm on its way to the islands.

Back at the hotel, Mateo's door was open, his room empty. All the rooms were empty now except hers. The sight filled her with regret and longing. Rainy season was in full force, and even the tourists had fled the chaos on the mainland. There would be no chance of finding work, even if she could dive again. If she'd ever believed in George's theories, it was now.

The universe was telling her it was time to go.

9

The row of seats on the ferry next to her were empty. The early ferry was only half-full; passengers dotted the rows of seats in clusters of two or three. Jess was the only passenger sitting alone. The floor beneath her feet vibrated with the hum of engines. It would be a short trip, two hours or so. The weather was good, the sea calm and obliging. Through the tinted ferry windows, the sea and sky appeared in varying hues of gray.

George had waited with her at the ferry dock. He'd seemed less robust than usual, as if his years were catching up with him all at once.



"The borders are closed. I don't think you'll be able to get a flight out," he said.  
"Why don't you stay a day or two, until things settle down?"

The U.S. had issued a travel advisory against Honduras, and military personnel had been barred from visiting the country. A few cruise ships still made it in, but it was hard to see her island hurting this way. Businesses were closing right and left, unable to survive the fatal combination of rainy season and the sudden absence of tourists.

"They'll reopen the borders. I'll stay in La Ceiba as long as I have to."

"Well, all right. But you could stay here. With me."

"You've already done enough for me." She would have to find a way to pay him back for the loan he'd given her—enough to make it back to the States. She'd promised herself she would get a job, any job, and send the money as soon as she could.

"Money doesn't matter. It's just paper," George said. He ran a hand over his face, where a layer of stubble poked out from his wrinkled skin. "I'm going to miss you, *Mija*."

"Me too," she said. Even as she hugged him, she drifted away. She remembered a line from a Stephen King novel she loved: *The world had moved on*. Roatan would move on—it already had. George would have to find someone else to talk to about the vibrations of the universe.

She went out onto the passageway that led between the fore and aft passenger decks. The railing was painted with a thick, white paint, tacky on the skin. She held the rail as she looked out; the mainland was growing larger in the distance. Green mountains rolled towards shore. The boxy buildings of La Ceiba were a white smudge on a green

background. She leaned out over the rail and the wind buffeted her face. She had to squint to see in that blast of air, and turning her head against it, she felt it part her hair in back. She looked to the north, in the direction of Roatan, but the sea there was a flat plane that went on forever.

At the ferry dock in La Ceiba, the other passengers dispersed into waiting cars. Jess caught a cab to a three-star hotel on the market street. Even though she declined his services, the concierge insisted on carrying her bag for her. He put it on his shoulder as if it were something valuable rather than a beat-up backpack covered in road dust. She guessed times were hard at the hotel, and she tipped him without complaint.

The rooms were antiquated, with old-school corded phones and a big, boxy TVs.

After showering and getting ready for bed, Jess turned on the TV. Most of the stations were in Spanish, but she came across CNN, and she left it on while she organized her bag. The crisis in Honduras had made international news, and the images of the exterior of the Brazilian embassy where Zelaya was holed up appeared at regular intervals on the screen, interspersed with a shots of angry protesters, their mouths and noses covered with bandanas as they ran from clouds of tear gas. She was only a hundred miles from San Pedro Sula, where things were getting bad, and there was no question of going anywhere near Tegucigalpa, the capital. The images on the screen contrasted with the silent, business-as-usual operations of this three-star hotel. It wouldn't be safe to go out at night, but in the daytime, the market street still had the same old collection of vendors. The convenience stores and *fruterías* would stay open. Everyone aware that this, too, would pass.

It was strange how island life made you complacent about the sufferings of the mainland. On the islands, the corruption and crime and daily atrocities in the cities seemed like events happening far away, on another planet. The islands were designed to be a tourist oasis, and islanders like Rosie and Bobby threw their hands up in the air at any mention of mainland politics. For the English-speaking black islanders, Roatan was its own nation, and its people resented the intrusive taxes and legislation that floated across the water and hung over them like a dark cloud. Now, that dark cloud had become a storm, and everyone was feeling it. Businesses would suffer; dive shops would close. Everything she loved would disappear.

*Not my problem, any more.*

Jess turned off the TV and got ready for bed. The screen's still, reflective surface followed her around the room like the blind eye of a statue.

10

Jess stood in the driveway in front of her father's house. She'd only had to spend one extra day in La Ceiba on account of the border closure. In the end, she'd caught a flight with a legion of Americans impatient to be home after days of flight cancellations.

Fairfield, California: a suburban town on highway 80 near the mid-point between Sacramento and San Francisco. Travis Air Force Base right outside of town, if you followed Air Base Parkway all the way to its end. Jess had passed through this place as a child, and it had always been an unremarkable expanse of suburbs and high schools and gas stations and fast food joints. A stopping point for people on their way to the big

cities; nothing to do there except live. If the town had a gravitational center, it was the mall: a cluster of department stores mostly frequented by dissipated teens.

The taxi had driven her down quiet streets with identical houses all painted in varying shades of beige. Some of the postage-stamp lawns were overgrown with weeds, and on one façade, Jess saw the unmistakable yellow streaks of dried egg yolk. For Sale signs dangled from posts in the front yard of one out of five houses. The bubble had burst hard in this part of California.

In the cul-de-sac behind her, two boys on bikes snuck occasional glances at her as they practiced BMX tricks. They popped wheelies with increased fervor, as if encouraged by the arrival of an audience.

Her father's house had no for sale sign, but the grass had grown to nearly calf-height, with dandelions and other weeds poking up here and there in aberrant patches of white and yellow. Newspapers had piled up on the front stoop and down the walkway. The Sunday papers were still wrapped in plastic, with dewdrops of moisture collected on the outside. There were at least two weeks worth of papers, but they looked old and soggy, as if they'd been at the mercy of the elements for some time.

Her pocket vibrated, and she nearly jumped out of her own skin. She'd forgotten about the flip-phone she'd picked up at the airport.

*Will b there in 5. H.W.*

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Wheeler was, apparently, a friend of her father's. She'd sent an email to her father's office, and she'd received an immediate reply that was almost enthusiastic. Wheeler was a friend and colleague —they'd served two tours

together in Iraq. He'd known Jack had a daughter, although no one had been able to get ahold of her. He'd opted to collect Jack's things and put them aside in a corner of his garage, in case she came back. He'd kept Jack's remains as well.

*His remains.* The idea was ridiculous to Jess. As if there was actually something left of her father. Ashes meant nothing—they were an illusion, a consolation prize for loss.

She dropped the phone back in her pocket and walked up the driveway to the front stoop. She sat on the steps and watched the two boys spin and jump over imaginary obstacles. After a while, one of the boys came to a stop in front of the driveway.

"You live here?" the taller of the two boys said.

"No," Jess said.

"Nobody lives here. My mom says all the houses here are empty but ours. Because of the economy." The boy couldn't have been older than eleven, and he clearly had no idea what "the economy" meant.

"You never saw the man who lived here?" Jess asked.

The younger boy perked up. "You mean the Colonel? I saw him once. He told us not to play near his car."

"He's my father," Jess said. She almost said *dad*, but the word sounded too informal to encapsulate their relationship. At home, he'd been *Sir*.

"But you don't live here?" The boys were fearless in their curiosity; Jess guessed it had been a long time since they'd seen anyone else on the cul-de-sac.

"It's complicated."

The boys exchanged looks. "Well, if you do move here, sorry about the lemons!" They grabbed the handlebars of their bikes and zipped away, hooting with laughter.

Lemons? Jess thought, and then she saw them. There were at least a dozen of them, most blackened and rotting where they lay half buried in the thick grass beneath the front window. She hadn't noticed before, but the window had streaks of grime that had to be the dried remnants of lemon juice. At least it wasn't eggs.

Twenty minutes later, Wheeler pulled up in a sleek black Lexus with tinted windows. He was a tall man with a horseshoe of black hair around his otherwise bald head. He was wearing dress blues: a blue blazer and tie, with a silver oak-leaf over each epaulette to show his rank. His left breast pocket was weighted down with no less than four layers of multicolored fabric: service ribbons. Above the ribbons, a silver eagle — his airman's wings. Wheeler and her father had both been pilots. They'd trained together in their younger, more glorious days.

"You must be Jessica," he said. He took her hand in a firm handshake and led the way up to the front door. "Sorry for the formality," he said, and gestured to his uniform. "I was at a retirement ceremony. Out with the old, as they say." He took a ring of keys out of his pocket and flipped through them.

"Thanks for coming," Jess said.

"I was a good friend of your dad's," he said. "My condolences." His fingers paused on a silver key. "Here. I think this is the one." He slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open, then stepped aside to let Jess in.

She went in with the trepidation of an archaeologist stepping into an Egyptian tomb. A short hallway led to a living room that was clearly the domain of a single man. A large leather recliner dominated the room, facing one of the largest flat-screen TVs Jess had ever seen. Off to one side, a kitchen. Everything clean and new. The carpet was still striped with vacuum tracks. She wondered if the cleaning service had known he was dead, and kept coming anyway.

"I'll be right back," Wheeler said. He put the keys in her hand and darted back down the steps to his car.

"There's no easy way to do this," he said when he came back. He was holding a black urn in one hand, and a triangular case in the other. The front of the case was glass, and inside she could see the familiar red and white stripes of the American flag. It was the flag given to all veterans when they retired, or died. When she didn't reach out to take either item, Wheeler set them down on the kitchen counter.

He took out a handkerchief to wipe sweat from his forehead and neck. "Your dad and I met back in eighty-nine. We trained together. He was a good man."

"Were you with him, when —?"

"No. He was alone, as far as I know. One of his subordinates found him. They tried to resuscitate, but it was too late. It was quick. Painless."

Painless. It was what everyone said about people who died quickly, or alone. It was easier if you believed it to be true.

Wheeler took a white card out of his pocket and placed it on the counter next to the urn and the flag. "If you need anything, you give me a call, all right? I'll leave you to

get settled." His eyes kept darting around, perhaps in relief at having finished this final chore. Was he remembering the last time he'd been here, when Jack was alive? Had they had an officer's poker night, some football game blaring in the background on the big screen? Jess didn't blame Wheeler for wanting to leave. The house was eerily silent. No skeletons, no dust, but a crypt nonetheless.

Wheeler shook her hand again and made to leave, then stopped.

"I almost forgot. I've got two of my men dropping off your father's car later this evening. I figured you might need a car. I've told them not to disturb you. They'll put the key in the mail box for you. Jack didn't keep much in his office desk, but I put it aside for you. It'll be in a box on the back seat."

She thanked him, and he left.

She lingered in the front entry hall for several minutes after he was gone. She didn't belong here, in this bachelor pad, a place she had never visited when her father was alive. She felt like an intruder, one of those pervs you read about or saw on the news, the ones who broke in and stole women's underwear. She didn't want to know what her father kept in his underwear drawer, although her mind sorted through the possibilities (*cash? a gun? women's lingerie?*). Standing here, looking at this house, presented the unavoidable reminder that she didn't know her father, that she had never known her father. He had wanted —no, preferred —it that way. She was tempted to light a match and burn the whole fucking place down. Well, she'd do the next best thing—she'd sell it, all of it. His furniture, his assets, his house. She would liquidate his life, and maybe, at last, she'd be free of him.



#

It wasn't as creepy as she thought, staying at the house. The place had been well maintained by his maid service —Reliable Maids, the card on the kitchen table read — and everything had been washed and starched and polished to the point that the house had taken on the vibe of a hotel or corporate rental. Jess supposed the cleaning service only applied to inside the house, which explained the uncollected newspapers on the front stoop.

She found a frozen burrito in the freezer, and washed it down with one of the Coors Lite beers she found in the fridge. There were at least two twelve-packs in there, but no actual food other than freezer stuff. It was clear he'd planned to be away a long time. In his office, she found the booze mother load —fifty-year old scotch, vodka, whiskey, and just about every other kind of alcohol under the sun. She fixed herself a vodka tonic —with ice, since the bottled tonic she found was warm —and walked around the office, the ice clinking against the side of the glass with each step.

The office was clearly where her father spent the bulk of his time when he was stateside. The desk was an austere monstrosity —shiny and black in a way that almost matched the shiny black urn that now contained his ashes. She could see herself reflected, mirror-like, in the Windex-streaked surface.

The office was cluttered in comparison with the minimal furnishings of the rest of the house. There were filing cabinets and a shelf for books. Most of the books looked to be binders with the familiar Air Force eagle on the front —training manuals, or administrative materials. Next to the liquor cabinet was a floor-to-ceiling glass case with

memorabilia from his glory days. A Top Gun-esque fighter jet helmet, the kind with an oxygen mask over the nose and mouth; a model of an F-4 fighter jet with a long black nose and green and tan camouflage on the wings; a cushioned case with medals and service ribbons, many with an eagle on the front. Her father had fought in two wars, three if you counted Iraq and Afghanistan as separate entities. The first had been his two-year stint in Riyadh starting in ninety-one. During that one —he was gone a year and a half that time —she'd received a bronze statue of a camel and a gauzy black scarf decorated with gold sequins.

In the desk drawers, she found bank statements and other bills. The only photo she found was a picture of her father in full dress uniform. His shoulders were stiff and square, and he wasn't smiling.

#

The next morning, she woke up on the living room floor. The television was on, but the sound was muted. On the screen, the hosts of Good Morning America gave those fake, made-for-TV smiles and gesticulated and brandished glasses of wine. The room swirled. *Still drunk*, she thought. The pleasant stupor she'd felt the night before had been replaced by an overwhelming nausea. Saliva pooled in her mouth, and she ran to the bathroom.

She emptied the contents of her stomach —mostly liquid —into the toilet. She waited to see if she would throw up again. When she didn't, she washed out her mouth in the sink and drank some water from the tap. The vomiting had helped. She still had that wobbly sense of not-rightness that came after excessive drinking, but it would pass. In

the bathroom mirror, she discovered her right cheek had pink lines and ridges where the carpet had imprinted on her flesh. She leaned forward until her head touched the cool mirrored glass over the bathroom sink. Her own eyes stared back at her, too large and close. She stepped back again and used a hand towel to wipe away the smear on the glass left by her forehead. She opened the medicine cabinet, took out three aspirin tablets, and swallowed them with tap water.

She did some more poking around her father's house. Her impressions from the previous day solidified —her father didn't live here, not really. The entire house had the feel of a hotel, a stopping place between destinations. The closets held plastic-wrapped dress uniforms and flight suits. In the drawers, the depressingly benign —ties and t-shirts and boxer shorts folded in neat piles. The only notable item was a wooden box full of poker chips from a variety of Vegas casinos: The Mirage. Luxor. Circus Circus. Her father had always been a gambler. Poker nights two or three times a week. Drives up to Cache Creek or one of the other nearby Indian Casinos. It was just another way for him to be gone from the house, sometimes for days on end. By the time she was in high school, she'd come to prefer it when he wasn't home. She could watch as much TV as she wanted. She could've invited over boys, but she hadn't had much luck with the opposite sex in high school. She'd been too introverted for that. All her travels had marked her as different, and the boys seemed to sense that and shy away. It wasn't until later, in college, that she learned how to pretend to be like other people.

The rest of the rooms in the house were equally lacking in personality. No knickknacks, no framed photos. Add some plastic fruit on the countertops, and it could

have been a model home. It had none of the personalizing touches of people inscribing themselves into a place.

Her father had been a professional wanderer, always on his way somewhere else. Absent most of her childhood. She hated that he had infected her with that same restless spirit, the onward-driving impulse that said the next place would be *the* place. She'd come to anticipate each move, the illusion of a fresh slate that came with each new environment. This place would be different, she told herself. This place would be better. Except it never was.

#

She went for a walk. It was a Monday afternoon. The driveways were empty of cars, the lightless windows curtained and shut. No sign of the boys on their BMX bikes—a school day. She walked an expanding square through identical suburban neighborhoods. The absence of people reminded her of a Ray Bradbury story she'd once read, where all the people in a town had died in some apocalypse, but robots continued to maintain the empty houses. In her father's neighborhood, every house was almost identical to the next, with only subtle alterations to provide the illusion of difference. These houses were for one thing: married couples—preferably straight ones—to have children in. Around these houses orbited the machinery of suburban life—schools, parks, day care centers, fast food restaurants, gas stations. In the morning, the parents would drop off their kids and drive to the base, or to nearby cities, to clock in their eight hours, and then drive home again to pick up their kids and escort them to soccer practice

or dance class. Then there would be dinner and television and sleep, and the routine would start over again the next day.

Or maybe not. The houses' pretty exteriors were lies. Inside, the families could be arguing and harboring petty resentments. They could be going through divorces or abusing their children. Like an amusement park, the only thing that mattered was maintaining the façade of the American dream.

She walked on. The houses ended at a waist-high fence with large signs spaced at ten-foot intervals. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW. Through the gaps in the chain link were the rolling hills of northern California, or what was left of them. Green, with the occasional grazing cow. Jess vaguely remembered coming here as a child, during one of her father's brief stays at Travis. There'd been no signs then, no fences. Only rolling green hills and cows and blue sky. They'd hiked up one of the hills —how old had she been? Five? Six? She'd gotten tired halfway, and her father had put her on his shoulders. All the rest of it had gone from her memory, but she could still remember looking down on the world from on high, the houses below like doll's houses she might pick up and crush with one hand.

Now, most of the rolling hills had been leveled and covered over with more roads, more mailboxes, more houses. All the marshlands she remembered were almost gone, replaced by suburban development. She'd passed a creek on her walk, but the water had been foamy with shower runoff.

Jess wove her fingers through the mesh of the chain link fence. She thought about climbing over and going back to the top of the hill. The old abandoned cement

factory was still there, as it had been for a hundred years. A block of gray cement that, from afar, looked like a castle turret. Teenagers had scrawled graffiti on the front, but it remained unchanged. She could go up there.

TRESSPASSERS WILL BE PROSECTUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF  
THE LAW.

Jess let her fingers drop. She didn't know where she belonged, but it wasn't here. Tomorrow, she'd call a real estate agent about selling the house. She'd also have to see a probate lawyer, and begin the process of closing her father's accounts. She'd sell everything else, and what she couldn't sell, she'd donate to charity. Her father still had a mortgage, and she suspected her father's penchant for gambling had done serious damage to his savings. But if she could sell the house —for the right price —she could go anywhere. Do anything. The problem was that the only place she really wanted to go was the one place that didn't want her back.

#

The next day, her father's car was waiting on the driveway, a Toyota 4Runner the color of a cherry tomato. She opened the mail box and tore open the white envelope with the key.

She got in the car, expecting —what? The perfume of his Old Spice after shave? —but the interior smelled disappointingly new. The glove box was empty of everything but insurance paperwork and a tire pressure gauge. As promised, the cardboard box on the back seat contained the usual suspects: a nametag with the words "Col. Jack Miller"

engraved in gold against a black background; staplers and other office supplies; a few Air Force coffee coasters with overlapping coffee rings.

She cranked the seat forward and turned the ignition. The engine roared to life. She rolled down the window. As she drove down the driveway, she saw the two boys again —this time industriously filling water balloons with a garden hose. They waved when she passed by.

It was a little over an hour's drive to the old storage unit. She'd found the key in a small Altoids can under her father's rolled up socks. She'd seen the auto-payment receipts in with his other financial documents. It was ironic, really, that technology made it possible for people to continue paying their bills for years after they'd died.

The *U-Store-It* consisted of about five rows of squat, concrete buildings surrounded by a chain link fence. The metal gate was open when she pulled up. Security cameras dangled from the roof every couple of feet, but there was no one else around. She walked back to the third building, a tightly-packed row of beige storage units. The padlock on number 28 was sticky with rust, but she wiggled the key, and it opened.

She lifted, hard, and the metal door slid up to let in the sun. Nothing had changed. The sofa, the photos, all of it was still there.

*I won't be haunted by you. Not any more.*

She ignored the boxes of Christmas ornaments and 1970s kitchen appliances and clothes. She would never try on her mother's clothes on again. Her conversations with George had made her mother take on a kind of mythic status in her mind: she was a free

spirit, beautiful and artistic. Jess could never be like her mother. Her mother had been kind, and good, and Jess didn't deserve her things.

Jess found the cardboard box with the words "Photos" marked in black Sharpie. She carried that box out to the car, then came back and took one last look around. She itched to be gone; the unit was an altar to a lost past, a dead place. She ached to be drunk, or high. Anything to ease the weight of the sadness that pressed down, threatening to crush her.

Jess pulled down the door to the storage unit but left it unlocked. In the main office, a man sat at a desk reading an issue of *Sports Illustrated* with a scantily-clad model on the front.

"I want to stop payments on number 28," Jess said.

The man put down the magazine and pressed a few keys on his computer.

"Name?"

"Miller. Jack."

He grunted. "That one's paid up until the end of the month. You have till then to clean it out."

"I don't want the stuff," Jess said. "Can you arrange to have it disposed of?"

"Sure. Fill this out."

He handed her a form. *Voluntary Relinquishment of Personal Property*. Jess took a pen from the cup on the desk, filled it out, and handed it back.

"We'll probably auction it off," the man said. "You sure you got nothing of value in there? I can give you a couple of days."



"I have what I need," Jess said, and left.

She went back to the house and began the painstaking process of scanning all the photographs she wanted to keep. In most of the pictures, her mother's brunette hair feathered out from her face like furred wings. The photographs had lost color from age, but Jess could still see how young and pretty her mother had been, in her colorful peasant girl skirts and loose, hippie blouses. Her father appeared in some, too, his face unlined, with bushy sideburns that protruded from the side of his head. There was the picture of her mother leaning against the blue exterior of a passenger sedan. A cone-shaped birthday hat extended from her head. She was smiling, in jeans and a pink t-shirt. Her wide smile was a result of getting a new car for her birthday, a brand-spanking new, 1986 Lincoln Town Car, a blue the color of Antarctic ice. The car she'd died in.

Jess set the photo aside and began flipping through the rest. Herself as a baby, then as a toddler. There were dozens of these — Jess with her face smeared with spaghetti sauce, a Bert and Ernie bib over her pink onesie; Jess on top of a wooden rocking horse, mouth wide in glee — but the photos grew markedly fewer after age four. After that, most of the photos were the obligatory school photos, where Jess stared stiffly at the camera, sometimes smiling, but more often, not.

She scanned the photos of her parents and of herself, but all the pictures of long-dead relatives and people she didn't know went into the trash. The process took hours. She listened to the radio and drank can after can of Coors Light from the fridge and waited for the scanner to finish each page. The last few photos took longer, because she

kept missing the "scan" button, and it was harder to decide which photos to keep when the room was spinning and her vision had narrowed to the tunnel of light in front of her face.

In the morning, she slipped the USB drive with the photos on a lanyard and hung it around her neck. On the kitchen counter, the flag and the urn were still there. The flag had no sentimental value to her; she would leave it behind with the rest of her father's things. The ashes . . . well. She'd figure out what to do with those later. It was time to start making calls. In a week or two, she'd be able to leave Fairfield and never look back. She'd go to the airport and hop on the next flight to anywhere.

"Free," she said aloud, but there was a bitter taste on her tongue, and she thought she was going to be sick.

## Part II: Actual Bottom Time (The Dive)

1

Jess opened her eyes, and immediately wanted to close them again. Sand crusted the edges of her eyelids, the bends of her elbows, the soft spaces behind her knees.

*Where* —the thought came, but then she remembered. She was on Haad Riin beach, on Koh Tao island, in Thailand. She pushed up with her palms, but there was something heavy on her chest. A man's head. He was young; his sand-dusted eyebrows and eyelashes gave his face an albino tint. Not a familiar face, but faces were different in the cruel light of a hangover.

Jess' clothes were still intact; she hoped she hadn't had sex with him. She was usually careful, but at some point last night, she'd succeeded in losing herself. *Stupid*, she chastised herself. She wasn't worried about pregnancy; it was surprisingly easy to obtain intravenous birth control in most foreign countries. But there were still diseases, and shame.

She checked her pockets. All her money gone except for loose coins. The rest had been stolen or spent or lost. Other sleepers were scattered around the beach like the corpses of a shipwreck. Thai pickpockets had tiptoed over the sleeping bodies like gardeners, plucking purses, wallets, cash.

"Candy," the girl had said. Blonde and pretty, with a Germanic accent. Her body festooned with painted glow-in-the-dark tattoos. Butterflies, hearts; most of them smeared to unrecognizable shapes. The pills were also pretty, pink and blue and stamped with unfamiliar symbols. Jess had taken three pills from the girl's palm and placed them

on her tongue. The girl's smile was beatific. She kissed Jess on the lips, and was reabsorbed into the crowd. The lips too soft and tasting of cigarettes.

The pills hadn't tasted like candy, but in a few minutes, Jess hadn't cared. Even now, the shallow dunes around her still breathed; they moved up and down like the inhalations and exhalations of some vast, sleeping body.

Jess wriggled out from underneath the boy's head. It hit the sand with a soft thud. He groaned, but didn't wake. She rolled herself into a sitting position. The beach and sky tilted. She waited for her equilibrium to return, then ran a hand through her hair. Sand and dandruff showered down her face and onto her shoulders. Sand crunched between her teeth. It took several tries to work up enough saliva to spit.

The second drink had been the first mistake. The drinks came in plastic buckets, the kind for building sandcastles. Jess didn't know how much whiskey and Coke went into a bucket. Enough: the best parties were always the ones you didn't fully remember in the morning. Two drinks, and Jess had merged with the beach dancers and their fluorescent smears of body paint and their half-naked bodies that had swayed and jumped to music that was an endless, singular beat. A drug-infused, hedonistic tide: transcendent, but ephemeral.

George. After five years of near-daily correspondence, George had stopped writing a month ago. No explanation. Her worry was like an insect that burrowed at the back of her mind, right next to the headache that was asserting its presence across her skull and down the back of her neck.

*George, where the fuck are you?*

The sky was pinking. She made her way up the beach to the main road. Her bladder pressed painfully against her insides, heavy with the weight of the previous night's alcohol. She ducked into a restaurant off the main road. In back, a squat toilet with a hole that dropped down into a stained cement floor. Dirty, but she didn't care. The relief was ecstatic. When she came out, the old woman who owned the restaurant scowled at her. Jess had enough Baht left to buy a bottle of water. The woman's scowl eased.

Jess drank the entire bottle in one go and left the empty bottle on a table. She still felt light-headed and strange, but time and reality were reasserting themselves. Her memories of the night came in slideshow flashes. A great fish, leaping out of the sea to consume dancers who waved their arms in welcome. Blue smells, and colors that burned: all wrong. She remembered dancing, looking for something. Had she been digging? Her fingernails were brown crescents.

People staggered along the main road like extras in a zombie movie. Some draped unconscious friends across shoulders: survivors of a drunken apocalypse.

A line of taxis waited by the road. One or two cars, but mostly three-wheeled tuk-tuks with drivers who waited and smoked with seen-it-all expressions.

She hitched a ride with a vanload of college boys from the States. A wet stream of vomit carved a path along the floor with each swerve. All the windows had been opened to compensate for the stench. Two men were passed out in the back seat, stacked on top of one other, face-down. The others had pulled down the pants of the one on top to reveal the white curve of his ass. Laughter, camera flashes.

"That's for Facebook," one said. A grinning, frat-boy type.

"Their moms are going to flip," another said, giving the first boy a high-five.

"Hey, what happened to Justin?"

"He went home with that chick, the one he was dancing with."

"The hot one?"

"Yeah."

"Lucky fucker. At least one of us got laid."

"You were so wasted I doubt you could get it up if you tried."

"I can always get it up with your mom."

"Fuck you!"

Jess turned her back to them as the two boys wrestled. A knee bumped her in the spine; water sloshed in her stomach.

"Here," she said, and the van slowed. She got out. The frat boy poked his head out the window and howled, wolf-like, at the now-risen sun. He was still howling as the van pulled away.

At the hostel café, Jess caught sight of her reflection in a mirror that had been tacked to one wall. She looked like the survivor of a chalk mining accident. Or a ghost.

She sat at one of the tables and ordered dry toast, a glass of water, and a Singha. All the café windows were open. A large fan blew humid air across the tables and ruffled the plastic table covers.

A hand brushed against the back of her neck.

"It's you," Lucas said. He bent down to kiss her, but she leaned away.

"I haven't brushed my teeth."

"I don't care," he said, but he didn't try to kiss her again. He sat across from her.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you again."

"You haven't. I'm dead."

Lucas' eyebrows dipped together into a puzzled vee. "What?"

"A joke. Never mind."

Lucas was pretty and French, with fluffy brown hair that dipped down over his eyes like a puppy's. Attractive, and easily manipulated: the perfect travel companion. She'd picked him up a week ago.

The waitress came over and placed the Singha on the table.

Lucas snorted. "Beer, at eight in the morning?"

"Hair of the dog."

She drank half the bottle in two gulps, more to irritate Lucas than anything else. He ordered an espresso and began talking about his night. It was that way with some people: they had the need to recap things, to turn the freshly-lived into stories to be told at dinner parties back home. For Jess, the previous night was still fresh, still happening. She pretended to listen to Lucas as he nattered on about the crazy, drunken behavior he'd seen, always with the unspoken understanding that *he* wasn't like *them*. She nodded at the appropriate times, with the occasional noncommittal *uh-huh* or *really?* The beer became a warm glow that radiated out from her stomach. She took tiny bites of her toast. Almost normal, but then, she didn't really remember what normal felt like any more. Maybe after a shower, she'd be able to sleep. With so many drugs still in her system, it

was even possible she wouldn't have the dreams again. But first, she needed to send a message to George. *Where the hell are you?* she would write, not for the first time. *Are you okay?*

After leaving Roatan, she'd never imagined that they would stay in touch. She thought he'd drift away, like everyone else from her former life. But he hadn't. Each day, he walked from Sandy Bay to the net café in West End to write her an email. He told her all the island gossip: the murders, the lovers' quarrels, the complaints about taxes and RECO, the Roatan Electric Company. He knew everything that happened on his corner of the island. He'd spent decades walking up and down the End, talking with islanders, with tourists, with anyone who would stop to chat. Most thought he was crazy, with his long silver hair and his enthusiastic monologues and his hand-waving. Like Jess, he spent his life surrounded by people, but somehow always wound up alone.

*A pack of dogs attacked a girl, got her pretty good. The locals put rat poison in the trash to kill some of them off. Bad karma all around. It's not for us to kill, the universe says so. But nobody listens to an old codger like me.*

It became important for Jess to find an internet connection in every new place. It was the first thing she did, no matter where she was. She wrote back as best she could, although her messages were less flowery than George's.

*Two more days in Bosnia. Buildings in Mostar still have bullet holes everywhere. War is now a tourist attraction. How's the book coming along?*

Sometimes she wouldn't write for a day or two, and she got a secret pleasure from the fact that George would worry about her. He'd put things like *URGENT* and



*WRITE BACK ASAP* in the subject line, but the message would contain only the usual anecdotes about a fire that burned down one of the *baleada* shacks, or about a woman who shot her husband because she suspected him of cheating.

Jess saved George's messages in an online folder labeled, simply, "George." From time to time, their time zones would converge, and they would fire messages back and forth. Jess would tap her fingers with impatience, refreshing her inbox every few seconds until she heard the reassuring ping of a new message in her inbox.

*The wild dogs are getting out of control. There's a pack of them now. When I walk at night, I have to carry a stick, to frighten them off.*

*So you're walking softly, but carrying a big stick?*

*You got it. Why don't you come for a visit?*

*Can't. Going to stay in Sarajevo a bit longer. I like this hostel. There's an unexploded mortar shell in the front wall. They call it a Sarajevo rose.*

*Don't forget to smell the real roses, Mija. Got to go now, Laurel's closing up shop for today. I mean it, come visit your old man.*

*You know I can't.*

*You don't know what you can and can't do until you try.*

*Whatever you say, Yoda.*

When she read his messages, it was as if he was sitting right there, in the room, talking to her. She could even hear his voice, the deep scratchy tones, the sharp, American r's and a's softened by the influence of sibilant Spanish consonants. He was a hybrid, like her. They both understood what it meant to be homeless —to be of many

cultures, and at the same time, none. Sometimes, though, she wondered if she stayed in touch because it meant someone would miss her if she died. Who were you, after all, if no one remembered you? Nothing but drifting molecules, nameless and unremembered.

George's last message, before his protracted silence, had been about a new chicken place that opened up in West End. *Can't even get a table, it's so busy. I go there early, to get a good spot. Every night, almost, except Monday, when Jeanie closes the place. Best chicken on the island. You got to come and try it, Mija.* She'd read and re-read the message, searching for clues (Had he sounded sick? Had he mentioned going away?). She'd poured over her own messages from the weeks before, hunting for anything she might have said to piss him off. She'd found nothing so offensive to cause George to write her off completely.

"Are you listening to me?"

Lucas. Something about the Half Moon Party.

"Sorry?"

"I was saying, a man was so drunk he almost drowned. I heard three people had to drag him out of the water."

"Maybe he thought he was a fish."

"If that were the case, he would have —what do you call them —*branchie* —"

"Gills."

"Right. Gills. Isn't that what all you divers want? To be fish?"

"Something like that."

Lucas swallowed the last of his espresso. He'd gone home from the party at the *temps précis*, the exact moment when the crowd turned from happy-go-lucky partiers to something darker and more dangerous. Jess, on the other hand, reveled in the communal madness that came over people between one in the morning and dawn. Lucas, and others like him, wisely knew when it was time to get back to the safety of their beds.

"I looked all over the beach for you, you know," he said. She could read the insinuation in his voice: *did you sleep with someone else?*

"I was there," she said. "I got lost in the moment."

"It was my last night. I wanted to spend it with you." His face took on an unattractive pout.

Jess didn't understand Lucas' attraction to her, but some people were attracted to broken things. He would inevitably promise to write or to call. And he might, for a few weeks, but distance and time would put an end to the affair. For Jess, these short-lived liaisons were more pleasurable than a pointless string of one-night stands. At heart, she was a monogamist; she craved companionship more than sex, and she was willing to trade the latter for the former.

In the end, she took pity on him. "I'm with you now," she said. She slipped her hands into his. "And anyway, you'll write me?"

His face eased. Jess was acting the way a girl was supposed to. He squeezed her fingers. "Of course."

Like all of them, Lucas was a disappointment. He would write because it seemed like the Right Thing To Do, payment for services rendered. He mistakenly believed all

women craved superficial romance in exchange for sex. Except Jess had used Lucas as much as he had used her. She was too preoccupied with George's silence, that nagging that voice that said *something's wrong, something's happened* to care about Lucas' immanent departure.

After Melissa Anderson, Jess had come to accept that she was not a good person—that she might not be capable of truly loving another human being. Because when Lucas was gone, she would do worse than not miss him. He would dissipate from her mind completely, until it was as if he had never been there at all.

2

Jess pressed wet paper towels to her face and tried not to vomit. Someone knocked on the lavatory door. She ignored them. She was trying very, very hard to get her shit together.

The problem was the booze. The word hangover no longer sufficed, when jumping out the plane, sans parachute, seemed more humane than returning to one's seat to sweat and shake and try to recapture some elusive sense of normalcy.

"Ma'am? Are you all right in there?" An attendant this time.

Jess silently cursed at the thin partition separating her from everyone else on the plane. There could be no privacy while crammed into a tiny metal tube with three hundred other people.

She forced saccharine cheer into her voice. "I'm fine. Be right out." Her fingers were trembling slightly. She didn't remember the last time she'd eaten; she was empty, flat—a card-board cutout of a human being.

She threw the paper towels away. Her cheeks were pink from the abrasive paper. She didn't think she would throw up now. That was good.

On a hunch, she'd emailed Bobby. He had rooms for rent on Roatan now, and a website with one of those automated contact forms. His reply had come the day after her message.

*Havent seen George round no more but my wife say he got real sick, there was an ambulance at his house not too long back. Thats all I know.*

She was on a flight to Roatan the next day. It wasn't strange for her to follow her impulses; for the last five years, she'd let herself drift. She'd stay a few days, or a month, in one place, and then move on, even though each step forward had felt like a step back.

She pushed open the lavatory door. Two flight attendants, a man and a woman, paused in their conversation. The corners of their lips twitched upwards and then back down in perfunctory smiles. A line of passengers glared at her from the aisle. She ignored them and stepped into the galley.

"Could I have a cup of water, please? No ice."

The female attendant grabbed one of the plastic Crystal Geyser bottles resting on the metal countertop. The woman was petite, and she wore so much makeup it gave her face the effect of a mask.

"Here you go, hon." The woman held the plastic cup out, and Jess noticed her fingernails had been painted a sparkly blue, with faux diamonds embedded in each tip. Next to the woman's arm, the drink carts had been pushed into a slot in the galley wall. In the metal drawers would be a shelf with cans of beer. It would be so easy to change her mind, to ask.

Jess thanked the woman and made her way back to her seat. How long did it take to clean out your system? Hours? Days? *Got to be able to hear the vibrations, Mija.* No matter if it hurt, or it made you feel sick and tired and old.

Her seat was on the aisle, next to an elderly couple who had spent most of the flight napping, their heads lolling into matching inflatable neck pillows. Jess looked past them at the patchwork landscape below. The orange smog on the horizon hugged the blocky shapes of the approaching skyline.

Jess sipped her water and waited for the edges of the world to sharpen. A heavy bump under her chair signaled the deployment of the plane's landing gear. Her ears popped as the plane dipped down. *Like going for a dive:* the echo of Rodriguez' voice outside the recompression chamber.

The elderly couple next to her woke up and deflated their neck pillows.

"Such a nice flight," the old woman said. Jess took the in-flight magazine out of the seat pocket and pretended to read. She hated the time-filler conversations of people between places. Even the most banal questions flummoxed Jess. Where do you live? *Everywhere, nowhere.* What do you do? *Nothing.* She'd received a grand total of one hundred and sixty-two thousand dollars from the liquidation of her father's estate. As

expected, he hadn't been good with his money. One too many officers' poker nights. But it was enough. In five years of travel, she'd managed to spend just over sixty thousand. Not enough to coast indefinitely —at some point, she'd have to decide what to do with the rest of her life.

To her fellow passengers, Jess was a bum, a *flâneuse*, a beatnik riding the rails. Strangers admired her freedom even while coveting relief that her life was not theirs. They had families, homes, children, pets. Lives. Before her travels, Jess had envisioned the romance of being directionless. Free. The truth was that traveling set you apart.

"My husband and I have a condo there," the old woman said.

The in-flight magazine was open to a picture of a Hawaiian beach. "Top 10 Oahu Sights," the adjoining text read.

Jess gave an evasive grunt. If the old woman insisted on making conversation, Jess would lie. Lies made things simpler. Once Jess fulfilled a stereotype, the questioner would lose interest. She was a recent college grad taking a year off; she was a woman visiting distant relatives abroad; she was a businesswoman on a week-long vacation. They didn't feel so much like lies as wishful thinking. Jess could see all the might-have-beens, the roads-less-traveled-by of her life. She couldn't suppress a certain amount of pride in the elaborateness of the lies she told, especially since no one, not once, had pointed a finger at her face to say *you are full of shit*. She secretly wanted them to, but they never did.

#

The George W. Bush International airport was like any airport, anywhere: a bewildering labyrinth of people and commerce that flowed through echoing, fluorescent-lit corridors. Through the tinted windows, a sea of asphalt stretched out to the horizon. In airports, the outside world became hazy, as if normal time wouldn't resume until you were out in the real world again.

The noise and industry of it was too much for Jess' island-attuned senses. Everywhere was something for sale: coffee and books and tourist trinkets and neck pillows and clothes and electronics. Jess had no desire to linger; she wasn't even tempted to stop and drink in the airport bars. She didn't like the cheap metal stools and the TV screens (always CNN, or sports) and the failed attempt to make people settle in and relax amid the atmosphere of impermanence. In the end, airport bars always felt like amusement-park versions of places —two-dimensional imitations that lacked any of the warmth and vibrancy of the real thing.

The customs area was a huge room with endless rows of cloth tape to designate the proper flow of human traffic. The room had been divided into two great, serpentine lines: one for citizens, and one for non-citizens and visitors. In the citizens line, Jess tried to guess where the other passengers had been and where they were going. Most seemed to be on their way home from vacation, their skin tanned and peeling about the edges. They wore T-shirts with "Saint Croix " or "Jamaica" in pastel letters on the front. They dragged tired children by the arm, children who sat on the dirty tile floors or leaned on suitcases as if they had just traversed the entire globe on foot.



"I'm hungry, " one girl said. She pulled on the leg of her mother's pants. Five, maybe six. She wore leggings under a ruffled pink dress that was stained with the remnants of an airline meal.

The mother stared into a cell phone, her thumbs dancing on the touch screen. "We'll eat on the way home."

"But I'm hungry noooooow, " the child whined. She punctuated each syllable with a stomp of the foot. Several people in line turned to stare, some with bemused smiles, others with more irritated expressions. The mother, outnumbered by her audience, sighed, dug into her purse, and came up with a breath mint. She brushed the lint off and handed it to the child, who popped it into her mouth and lapsed into a contented silence.

Jess shivered in the artificially-cooled air. Ahead, people moved forward in geriatric shuffles. Pockets of empty space traveled in waves through the rows. Jess felt the hive mind of this, the unspoken cues that said *wait, now go, wait*.

At last, she got to the front of the line. The agent scanned her passport into the computer and stamped the page. "Welcome home," he said as he slid her passport back across the counter. She didn't correct his mistake.

#

At the security checkpoint on the way to her connecting flight, Jess' bag paused halfway through the x-ray machine.

She folded her arms and waited. She'd been expecting this. The x-ray man asked another agent to put her bag through again. They did. Another pause. Finally, an agent pulled her out of the line and asked to search her bag.

The agent was a thirty-something black woman with a no-nonsense vibe.

"Ma'am, I'm going to open this pocket now," she said. "Do you have anything sharp in here?"

"No."

The agent wore thick blue latex gloves. She moved her hands swiftly through the front pockets with the practiced gestures of someone who enacted this ritual a hundred times a day, or perhaps a thousand. She opened the main pocket and dug down until she found the blue box. Jess had bought it at a market in China. Wooden, but painted with shiny, undulating waves of blue and gold lacquer. The design had reminded her of the sea.

"Ma'am? What is in this box?"

Jess met the woman's gaze. "My father," she said. There—a twitch of the woman's brow, some long dead spark of curiosity coming alight.

"I need to open this."

"Go ahead."

Jess refused to put her father's ashes in a checked bag. She worried her bag might be lost, although there would be no small irony in having her father's ashes traveling forever, loaded into and off of planes, circling, always uncollected, on the baggage carousels of the world—a kind of postmortem revenge for her peripatetic childhood.

The agent twisted the bronze latch. Inside, a plastic bag, thick and cloudy, the opening secured with layers of heavy packing tape. Jess wondered for a moment if the woman would actually cut open the bag to examine the ashes, but she closed the box and placed it in a tub to go through the x-ray machine yet again.

On the monitor, people's possessions were reduced to two-dimensional outlines. The box appeared dark green, with lighter fragments, like stones in a Zen garden. Bones.

This time, the x-ray man gave the thumbs up. The agent returned and placed the box back in Jess' bag. Her movements were slower now, almost gentle. She zipped up all the pockets and handed the bag back to Jess.

"Have a nice flight," she said. A dismissal. Jess almost thanked her, but she could see the woman had already turned and moved on to the next passenger, the next problem to solve.

3

In Thailand, the oft-repeated slogan *same-same but different* had been everywhere: printed on tourist trinkets and t-shirts, written in bright colors in shop windows, uttered by tourists and tour guides with brain-numbing regularity. The slogan had no origins that Jess knew of, but for her, it encapsulated the feeling of returning to a place you had once lived.

After so long fantasizing about her return, the Roatan Airport felt too bright, too real. *I'm here*, she reminded herself as she walked down the steps of the plane and onto the tarmac. *I'm here*, she repeated as she walked through the airport's glass double doors.

The luggage carousel, which had been broken the last time she was here, gave sporadic shrieks as it lugged heavy tourist bags around, only occasionally dumping one on the floor. Same-same, but different.

On the curb, the usual cluster of *taxistas* jostled each other and fought to nab the tourists who stepped out and blinked at the organized chaos like cave-dwellers unaccustomed to the sun.

"Twenty dollars," one said to Jess, but she resisted the press of the man's hand on her elbow.

"*Collectivo*," she insisted. It was cheaper to share a cab with others, and Jess liked even the sound of the word, *collective*.

"*Barata*," the man called to the others. Her feeling of triumph vanished. A *barata* was a cheapskate, a tourist who insisted on paying local prices.

He pointed her towards a car parked along the curb, its engine running.

She took a seat in back next to a mother and a child. The child was sprawled out on the woman's lap, asleep. A man took the passenger seat up front and stuck his head out the window to smoke. No one spoke.

The driver closed the trunk and got in. In seconds, they were on the main road. The road had the same cracked asphalt, the same pastel-colored buildings crowding its edges. Except now more of them had "For Sale" and "For Rent" signs in the window. The aftershocks of the U.S. economic crisis still reverberated here, and they hadn't been helped by the military coup. There was a new president, one whose name Jess only remembered because it had the Spanish word for Wolf, *lobo*. Pepe Lobo was in charge,

and the country would be quieter, quieter but not quiet, because there was always the risk that the mainland would once again reach out with rough hands and shake the island, the way it had with the Zelaya affair.

All the other passengers got off in the village, a cluster of houses between Coxen Hole and West End. There, nothing had changed. The houses were still squat wooden buildings with yards fenced in to keep in the chickens that pecked at the red dirt. Unpaved gravel roads disappeared into the trees. The store, the nexus of all activity in the village, was busy today. A man was selling slices of papaya from a stand. A group of boys played soccer in the parking lot; they darted out of the way as the taxi passed. The passengers scattered in different directions. The smoking man stopped to chat with the people milling about in front of the store. Another man came up to the driver side window with packets of cigarettes in his hand. The driver bought two packs, lit a cigarette, and did a quick three-point turn.

They drove faster; most of the driver's cigarette smoke blew back into Jess' face. The distances seemed greater than she remembered, and she was afraid she would pass George's house without seeing it and have to walk back. She leaned forward in her seat. There —the pink was unmistakable amid the greens and blues.

"*Baja.*" The driver braked and swerved to the side of the road. Jess got out, and for the first time, she could smell the Caribbean. She knew them all —the harsh, briny stench of the Pacific, the smoother, milder scent of the Mediterranean. The Roatan sea was subtle; it smelled of sea grass and salt and living things.

Jess made her way down the narrow path to George's house. Weeds caught at her pants and shoes. The path had grown over with a fresh wildness. The Tree House loomed over the rocky, sea-grass-choked shoreline as it always had, but she didn't need to knock to see that George wasn't home, that he hadn't been home in some time. The pink paint on the exterior was peeling in spots, and the roof sagged inwards.

Her mind went immediately to the worst-case scenario. He was dead. His rotting corpse lay inside the husk of his house. She shook her head to dispel the morbidity of her thoughts. She didn't want to carry the ashes of another father.

The steps up to the house moaned under her weight. She went around back, where the remains of George's patio furniture sat in a moldering ruin, eaten by sun and rain.

"Hello?" she called. "Anybody home?" She didn't expect an answer, and there was none.

Breaking in was easy. Like most houses on the island, the windows were covered with four-inch-wide horizontal glass slats set into metal brackets. Jess wiggled one, and the glass popped out into her hands. One by one, she removed the slats and set them on the porch. It was a good time of day for breaking and entering; she doubted she'd be seen. Few tourists came to this section of Sandy Bay, and fewer still would brave the shade-less afternoon heat. Sweat pooled behind Jess' knees, under her breasts, in the creases of her elbows; it dripped between her eyebrows and pooled under her eyes until she wiped it away with a moist hand.

One of slats gave her trouble, and the corner cracked, dropping a triangular piece of glass onto the porch. No matter: the hole was big enough. She stuck her arm through and unlocked the back door.

In the living room, the remnants of George's life were scattered about like a child's discarded toys. Soggy notebooks lay like bloated corpses in puddles of water. Stains on the sofa cushions formed tie-dye in shades of brown. On the hardwood floors, sunlight carved geometric patterns where it shone through the fractured roof. The air reeked of mildew and rotting paper; it coated Jess' skin like a shroud.

She kneeled by a congealed puddle in the center of the living room. Dead insects floated on the surface. Nearby, a waterlogged notebook. The ink had blurred into Rorschach shapes, with only a word here and there to tell that this had once been George's life's work. The pages disintegrated in her hands.

*It's about the universe, Mija, he'd told her. It's everything. It's you, and me, and everyone.* Twenty years spent scribbling in hundreds of spiral-bound notebooks. His most precious possessions, in ruins. Jess let the notebook fall back to the floor. She sat on her haunches and pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. She took a deep breath, and got up again.

The back bedroom was in better shape. The roof there was still intact, and Jess found yet more notebooks, many of these covered in protective plastic. Not all of his manuscript was lost, then. She opened one of the notebooks to a random page.

*to puncture reality and access the alternate universes Meditation is key, absolute stillness and you can bend reality the seagulls do this in flight when they fly so high we can't see them traveling through time and space...*

She set the notebook down and closed the pages. Reading it felt like a violation. George's writings might be complete and utter nonsense, but writing made him happy the way diving did —had —for her. Something would have to be done to protect these notebooks from further damage.

The bed was unmade and stank of mildew. The mattress was a lost cause, sagging and crawling with God-knew-what. The dresser and standing fan were coated in a thick carpet of grime. Off to the side, a small closet, where shirts hung limply from wire hangers. The interior smelled oddly of old neoprene —did George keep his wetsuit here?

She gave a soft *oh*-sound when she saw what was on the floor. A large mesh bag, bulging with shapes as familiar to her as her own hands: a BCD, instructor slates, wetsuits. Her gear bag, untouched after five years.

*Sell it*, she'd told him when she left. *Give it away. I don't care.* But he hadn't. He'd kept it here, as if he'd always known that someday she would return. She ran her fingers along the rough material. Flakes of salt broke away and fell to the floor like sand.

She slammed her fist into the wall.

"Where the fuck are you?" she shouted at the empty room.



She went back out and replaced the glass window slats. The slat with the broken corner wobbled, but held. On her way back down the steps, she caught sight of something fluttering on the front door. A flyer. She went back up.

*A Vender*, it read. *Llama* 504-443-1212.

She ripped the flyer off the front door, stuck it in her bag, and headed back up to the main road. *A Vender*. Who had put the house up for sale? George? The local authorities? There would be an explanation. She would ask George. If —*when*, she corrected herself —she found him. She needed to take care of the basics first —a room, a shower, some food, sleep.

She flagged down a bus, one of the repurposed tourist minivans that trolled up and down the main road during the day. In minutes, she was back in West End, bumping and rolling along the potholed sand road. It was all same-same, but different. The burger joint across from the broken gazebo now sold *baleadas* and *pastelitos*; many of the dive shops had new signs and new staff, but they would use the same old tanks and the same old gear and dive on the same old boats. More importantly, the sea was the same old Roatan sea —unchanged, waiting.

4

The sign for the Paradise Hotel and Restaurant tilted at a perilous forty-five degree angle, the letters mere outlines of their former selves. The broken hammock that had once dangled between the trunks of two mango trees was gone, the place where the

bark had been worn away by the ropes the only sign that it had ever been there. Jess walked up the beach and around the side of the kitchen.

"Hello?" she called. "Rosie? *¿Está alguien aquí?*"

The back door to the restaurant was shut. A thick, rusted chain encircled the doorknob, trussed together with a padlock the size of her palm. In the square sand yard, rotting mangoes and cocoplums lay everywhere in various states of decay, their fibrous insides crawling with insects. Across the yard, the single-story row of numbered rooms looked empty, the porch coated with layers of decomposing leaves.

The Paradise had struggled even when the island was at its peak. Not many tourists thought to travel this far down the end of the End, and the owners did little-to-no advertising. Certainly not a web page or an email address. The place had been tucked away behind the mango trees like Jess' own secret garden, but even secret gardens needed money to pay RECO.

She called out again, and this time she heard a rustling sound. A black blur streaked towards her, so fast she didn't have time to move out of the way. Her mind took in images like flash photographs: Fur. Teeth. Black eyes. A rope tied around a muscular neck, its end dangling in the sand.

The dog bared its teeth and growled. Some kind of Doberman mix. Jess took a slow step back, but the dog crouched, preparing to spring.

*"Fuera! Fuera!"*

A man appeared, waving a machete. He was no more than five feet tall, in dusty clothes and a weather-beaten straw hat. As he approached, the dog shied and ran off behind the hotel. Barks echoed back through the trees.

"He obeys me," the man said in Spanish.

Jess reminded herself to breathe. "Thank you," she said. "He gave me a fright."

The man laughed. He was missing several front teeth.

"He's a guard dog. He eats the other dogs." He brought his hands together, fingers entwined. Jaws, closing.

"I understand . . . I was looking for a room?"

The man took off the hat and scratched his head. The hair beneath was black and greasy; it stuck to his forehead in clumps.

"The manager isn't here today."

"Do you mean Rosie?"

"You know Rosie? She doesn't work here any more. She's gone! She left, oh, a year ago."

Jess' heart sank. "Who's the manager now?"

"Clive. He's only here sometimes. I'm called Don Pedro. I am the *wachee-man*." *Wachee-man*. Watchman. To verify this, he lifted up the hem of his blue work shirt to reveal a pistol with a wooden grip. "The hotel is safe. But I have to have care not to blow off my *cojones*!"

The man laughed effusively at his own joke. Jess smiled.

"Do you know where Rosie went?"

Don Pedro waved a dismissive hand. "*Pah*. French Harbor. She works in the big *supermercado*. Eldon's."

"Is it possible to rent a room for tonight?" She didn't know why she was being so persistent. The Tree House was uninhabitable, but hotels were a dime a dozen in West End. Even in peak season, the island's hotels were rarely full. But Jess clung to the familiar as if it were a life raft. Besides, she was too tired to go all the way back down the beach to one of the other budget hotels. Her nostalgia made her stubborn.

"The manager isn't here. Come back tomorrow," Don Pedro said. He turned.

"*Espera*," Jess said. "I want to stay tonight. Perhaps there is something we can do?" She took a ten-dollar bill out of her pocket.

Don Pedro squinted at it, then met her eyes, calculating.

"*Síííí*," he said slowly, taking the bill. "I know where Clive hides the keys. Come."

He led her back to the restaurant and slid a key into the padlock. The rusted chain thudded to the ground. The door gave way with a resistant creak. In the dim light that filtered in through the open door, Jess could see that the remnants of the former restaurant were still there, as they had been before. Dust-covered chairs stacked against the wall; cheap plywood tables covered in plastic sheeting. Off to the side, the kitchen, a jumbled mess of half-rusted pots and pans, empty beer bottles, and boxes. One box had a picture of a deep-fryer on the side, the kind used in industrial kitchens. The edges of the box had been chewed away by mice. A dead cockroach lay in one corner of the room, its feet stuck together as if in prayer.

Don Pedro went behind the counter and began rifling through a drawer. "The keys are here, I think," he said. He pulled things out: yellowed papers, a rusty whisk, a broken pencil.

"You are *extranjera*? From where? Your Spanish is very good."

*Estranjera*: foreigner. The word implied strangeness: the act of being a stranger.

"I'm American —from California."

"Ah, California. Very pretty. I would like to go there."

"Are there any other guests staying here?"

"No," he lamented. "No people for a long time! They brought me here to keep the thieves away. One night, the *pendejos* came and took two of the air conditioners. Right from the wall! But I am here now —ha! I have them!" He jangled a large ring of metal keys. "*El Jefe* hides them from me, but I'm too intelligent." He tapped his forehead.

"Come, I'll show you the room."

He led her back out into the sunlight and across the yard to room seven.

"What about this one?" she said, pointing to the room next door. Her old room.

"That's the room they took the air conditioner from. Big hole in the side of the wall. That room isn't good now —you don't want that one. This one is the best. Not so many things broken."

He opened the door. The room was the same layout as her old room had been. A bed took up most of the available space. The mattress was covered with insect casings and gecko droppings. The walls were dotted with dead mosquitos, the bloody streaks like the first strokes of a Jackson Pollock painting. Opposite the bed was a tiny dresser,

with one drawer, roughly hewn from planks of wood. A doorway —sans door—led into a bathroom with a toilet, a tiny shower stall, and a cracked mirror. The feeling of wrongness returned.

Don Pedro stepped forward and peeled off the coverlet. He took it outside and shook off the insect casings, then put the coverlet back on the bed. Leaves and other pieces of debris still clung to the blue fabric.

"Does the shower work?" Jess asked.

"Yes, but there's no current." No electricity meant no hot water.

"When will it return?"

Don Pedro shrugged and made a *who can know, with such things?* gesture. So the hotel hadn't paid its electricity bill. Not a good sign.

In the old days, the RECO man would come and put a padlock on the main power box and shut off the flow of electricity to the hotel. Rosie kept a pair of bolt-cutters on hand for precisely those times. She'd sometimes ask Jess for an advance payment on her month's rent, so she could go up to the main office and keep the RECO men at bay for another week or two. The island had one massive generator supplying power to the entire island. On most days, the cloud of steam expanded out from the island and over the water like fog.

Don Pedro handed her the key. Even he thought she was crazy to stay here. But she'd already paid him ten bucks, and it was too late to back out now. She could get by without electricity for one night.

"Do you have candles? And matches?"

"*Si, Si*, of course. I'll send one of my children."

He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "But Clive returns tomorrow in the afternoon. You must be gone by then, yes? You can't tell him I let you in. If you want to stay longer, you must talk with him. He'll make you pay more than me!"

She put the key in her pocket. "I understand."

Later, when she went out to buy some supplies, she saw Don Pedro watching her from the sand yard. He waved, and she waved back. The dog sat on his haunches near his owner's feet, panting. Across the water, the sun was already close to setting. The surface was so calm the sky was reflected back upon itself, as if land and sea had merged. It was almost like the feeling of home, but as soon as she felt it, the moment passed, and she was a stranger again.

5

Ernesto Cardona's office had white walls and white floors and white furniture. It could have passed for the waiting area of a psychiatric hospital, if not for the large, color photos of vacation rentals framed and mounted on the walls. *Live in Paradise* was written below one photo of a sprawling mansion with white columns. The right side of the poster was dominated by a European-style garden that led down to a Photoshop-blue sea.

"*Buenas tardes*. I regret that you have come all this way," Cardona said. He was a slender, forty-something man with a carefully-sculpted moustache.

They sat across from one another, Cardona's expansive, glass-topped desk like a no man's land between them. Jess felt oddly as if she were in elementary school again, sent to yet another principal's office at yet another new school.

"I came about my father's house."

"Really, it wasn't necessary for you to come from the United States," Cardona said.

He hadn't sounded pleased when she'd called to ask about the house. He hadn't known George had a daughter. He'd insisted she come to the office to discuss the matter.

Jess gave him a level stare. "I want you to take the house off the market."

Cardona lifted his hands in an apologetic gesture. "I'm afraid the property now belongs to the island of Roatan."

"That's my father's house. You can't sell it without his permission." She tried not to flinch or look away. She was gambling on the fact that Cardona didn't know she wasn't really related to George. Cardona was an opportunist, albeit a slimy, bottom-feeding one. The legalities involved in confiscating someone else's property didn't matter much in a country like Honduras. Most laws were flexible—if you had money.

"We already have an offer on the property," Cardona said.

"From who?"

He shifted in his chair. "A land developer. They want to remove, ah, the existing structure. To make way for commercial properties."

"You mean condos."



"Yes." Some of the smugness had gone. He was nervous now. She could practically smell it.

"Where is my father?" she asked.

"You don't know?" The smugness returned, this time tinged with condescension.

"He was taken to the hospital. He is not well."

"What do you mean? He's sick? With what?"

"I don't know. Weren't you in contact with him?"

"I was traveling. Where is he?"

Cardona tapped his bottom lip with one finger. "He went to Roatan Hospital, but after that I don't know. I heard he was taken to the mainland. I'm afraid I don't have any other information for you. I, ah, didn't know Señor Moreno had a daughter until you called me this morning. We would have contacted you sooner, of course."

He gave her a used-car-salesman smile, which she matched. "Of course."

He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a stack of papers. He placed them on the desk, came around the table, and put a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Please tell me if there is anything else I can do for you. But, seeing that you are here in person, you can sign these papers, and we will make sure you and your father receive a fair percentage of the sale."

The hand on her shoulder was too warm, almost hot; she shrugged, but Cardona didn't remove it. She looked at the papers. They were in Spanish. Some kind of contract for sale. She wanted to get away from this man, with his white teeth and white walls and white furniture.

"I need to look these over. With a lawyer," she said. "And I'll need to talk to my father, of course."

Cardona's smile widened. "*Claro*," he said. But you'll see he is not well. I'm sure he would be happier if he knew his daughter was taking care of his business for him." He leaned closer. She inhaled the sour odor of male sweat mixed with cologne.

"I'll speak to him first. Excuse me."

The hand on her shoulder fell away. Cardona's expression reminded her of a hungry cat eyeing a bird.

They shook hands.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," Cardona lied.

Jess went back outside. The meeting left a sour taste in the back of her throat. She was so distracted she almost walked right into an old woman on the street. The woman shouted something along the lines of "watch where you're going, idiot!" but Jess didn't care. She needed to think.

#

At Lupita's Place, she took a table facing the sea. After bringing her food, the servers ignored her. No one recognized her.

A beautiful day. Perfect conditions for diving. She could make out two dive boats tied up at the dive sites closest to West End —Divemaster's Choice and Lighthouse. A hundred feet of visibility, at least. The surface would be like a window to another world.

She unfolded the sales papers and placed them on the table in front of her. She scanned the pages, but it was rough going. The document was written in legalese,

something she would have trouble understanding in English, let alone in Spanish. All she got was that she would be authorizing the sale on behalf of George. If Cardona found out she wasn't George's legal daughter, George was screwed. And it was only a matter of time before he did. Cardona would sell the property out from under George. Seafront property was at a premium on Roatan. They'd raze George's house to the ground, and put up cookie-cutter condos. The only solution was to find George, and bring him back.

6

She went to Roatan hospital first thing in the morning. The front was a concrete wall painted yellow and brown with the words "Hospital Roatan" painted in bold letters. Off to one side, a matching lettered sign read "Hospital Roata," the N lost in some unknown mishap. Jess had heard horror stories about the hospital —women in labor told to come back later because there weren't enough beds; sick people who couldn't get treatment because of the hospital's lack of resources. Many of the hospital's doctors and nurses were volunteers from western countries. There were plans in the works to build a new hospital, but for now, most of the island's residents had to get by with what they had. The beauty of the island had a way of distracting Jess from the reality of the poverty on the island. It was a part of the island tourists never saw, if they were lucky.

The interior was benign enough —glass doors that led into a waiting area —but the long green hallway was crowded with patients waiting for treatment. People sat on the floor and leaned against the wall. Most of the injuries she saw looked minor —cuts or burns. At the front desk, Jess made clear she was not a patient to the harried-looking

clerk. She was sent down the hall to an office with shelves of paperwork. Patient files had been shoved into every available space, and Jess thought it would only take one match for the entire room to go up like a torch. At a narrow desk, a file clerk stared fixedly into the monitor of an antiquated computer. Her fingers danced on the keys.

"Excuse me?" Jess said.

The clerk glanced up, then back to her monitor. "Yes?"

"I need information about a patient?"

The clerk sighed and pushed her chair away from the desk.

"Fill this out," she said, and handed Jess a clipboard.

Jess wrote in George's information —what she knew, anyway —and put the clipboard back on the counter. She had to wave her arms to get the clerk's attention again. The clerk pulled out a large stack of patient files and flipped through them until she found the right one.

"Jorge Moreno was sent to San Pedro Sula," the woman said. She flipped through the pages. "He had a stroke."

Jess' felt as if someone had taken hold of her heart and squeezed. A stroke. George wasn't even seventy yet. Sixty-seven, or sixty-eight. In good shape. He swam, he dived, he walked up and down the beach every day. It didn't make sense.

"How bad? Is he okay?"

The clerk flipped another page. Jess could see handwritten notes scrawled on yellow notebook paper.

"He was critical, but stable, when we sent him over." Seeing Jess' horrified expression, the clerk softened her tone. "Wait here."

She went back to her desk, picked up the phone, and dialed. *Did they have a Jorge Moreno there, as a patient? And what is his condition? I see. Yes, his daughter is looking for him. Yes, I'll tell her. Good-bye.* She hung up the phone. "Your father was moved to a Catholic hospital there called *Hospital Santa Ángela de la Cruz*. He is stable, but his brain was impaired by the stroke. He can't walk or feed himself. The right side of his body is weak."

Jess tried to imagine George weak and bedridden, but her imagination failed her. She saw only the old George, her George: striding down the beach, his hair fluttering in the breeze as he listened to the universe.

She thanked the clerk and left. On the street, she leaned her body against the peeyellow wall.

George had written her every day. He'd saved her that day on the wall; if it hadn't been for his octopus, she might have drowned with Melissa Anderson. She could still feel her lungs burning with the desperate need for air. She could feel George's hand on her arm as he pulled her to the surface. She could hear his voice calling her *Mija*, she could see his words scrawled across computer screens from Portugal to Japan. She tried to imagine George sunken into a hospital bed, surrounded by machines.

*I can't do this*, she thought. *I can't.*

"*Señorita?* Are you well?" A middle-aged woman with shopping bags hanging from each arm.

Jess wiped her face with her sleeve and pushed herself upright. "*Estoy bien.*  
Thank you."

The woman watched her uncertainly for a moment, then continued on her way.

Jess walked to the place where the road split into three. One way led deeper into Coxen Hole; the other led in the direction of West End; the last led east, to the airport.

Jess watched the buses and cars and scooters circle and spin off in each of the three directions. To go east would mean leaving George behind. She could go on as she'd done before —until the money ran out, or until there was no place left to go.

No, she couldn't give up so easy. She turned her face west. Even here, in the middle of the poverty-stricken street of Coxen Hole, the island called to her. Even the ugliness of Roatan was beautiful.

7

At the San Pedro Sula bus terminal, Jess paid a *taxista* named Miguel a hundred dollars to drive her around all day and not ask any questions. She chose him because he had a kind face, as oval and expressionless as an egg.

She relished in the hot wind that poured through the car window. People on the street laughed and talked and called to each other. Their words drifted in, but her mind was too weary to translate. It had taken most of the morning to get from Roatan to San Pedro Sula. She'd taken the early ferry, then an express bus. She was the only foreigner on the bus, but Hondurans were a polite people. They didn't stare; rather, they were so busy not-staring and not-noticing Jess had felt oddly ostracized. Not many tourists took

these commuter routes between cities. Mostly missionaries traveling in do-gooder packs, or backpackers on their way south to the Panama canal. Tourists clung to the islands, where the country's poverty and crime remained hidden from view. When tourists did venture into the mainland, more often than not, they restricted themselves to luxury buses, the kind with air conditioning and television screens.

Honduran cities were dangerous places, but all cities could be dangerous. Money helped, and knowing how not to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Jess didn't like to stay long in cities, but not because of fear; being surrounded by people only made her feel more alone.

Miguel dropped her off in front of the hospital, a concrete fortress with barred, curtained windows. The front entrance had two sliding panels of metal bars that could be fastened at night with a chain.

"*Espérame aquí,*" she instructed Miguel as she got out of the car. He gave a brusque nod. He might still take off with her money and call it a day, but she didn't think he would. Not out of altruism, but because she'd told him that she might need him again tomorrow. She was paying him more than he would make in a week, maybe even longer. As she walked away, she heard the tinny sound of music coming from the car's radio. Some sad love song.

The hospital's reception area had a concrete floor and concrete walls. The walls had been painted green from the floor to about chest height, as if the painter had gotten tired halfway through the job and given up. On the wall, a wood-sculpted Christ stared balefully down at the empty waiting room. His body was gaunt and twisted, but his eyes

were serene and blank, the vertical grain of the wood giving the effect of cat's eyes. Under one of the plastic chairs, a mutt, probably seeking sanctuary from the day's heat, scratched at an ear.

Behind the counter, a nun. Her eyes glowed with the reflected light of a black-and-white TV. Her dark skin stood out sharply against the unnatural white of her uniform. Her hair was covered with a wimple, and around her neck hung a tarnished silver crucifix. Jess couldn't see the TV screen, but the organ music said it was some kind of church service.

"*Buenas tardes*," Jess said. "I'd like to visit Jorge Moreno."

The nun pointed to a clipboard. "Sign in."

The clipboard had been chained to the counter. A ballpoint pen had been tied to the metal clip with a piece of string. Jess filled in the boxes. *Jessica Moreno*, Jess wrote. *Hija*. Daughter.

The nun didn't ask for any identification. She glanced over the clipboard, then motioned Jess in the direction of the long hallway that stretched back into the belly of the hospital. "Room twenty-three."

The smell, which had been mitigated in the waiting area by the proximity to the open doorway, was overpowering in the close confines of the hall. The air reeked of disinfectant and body fluids and sickness. It reminded Jess too much of her mother's final days. She curled her fists inward until her nails broke the skin of her palms. The sick and the old were everywhere, some positioned in wheelchairs, others shuffling aimlessly from one end of the hall to the other like passengers waiting for a train that



would never come. Beyond the door-less openings into the rooms, patients lay on cots or in medical beds with rails that kept them from falling onto the floor.

A hand grabbed her arm. "*Mi Angel. Sálvame, mi angel.*" An old man with milky eyes and a yellow crust at the corners of his lips. His fingernails bit into the soft flesh above her wrist. Jess wrenched herself free, repulsed. One of the nuns in the hall rushed forward and led the man to a nearby wheelchair. The man collapsed in on himself, his mouth still murmuring *my angel, save me, my angel.*

Most of the beds had only one thin blanket, which patients had wrapped about themselves in strange configurations reminiscent of infant swaddling. A sea of the dying, the forgetful and forgotten. One man lay naked on the mattress, his sheets tangled around his legs, his penis almost hidden by the tufts of gray pubic hair between his legs. Jess concentrated on finding George—if she didn't, she'd run back outside and never come back.

There were numbers painted above each door. Odds on the right, evens on the left. *Seventeen. Nineteen.* The place was less a hospital than a dumping ground. Jess guessed its primary function was long term care. Some rooms had machinery, but there didn't seem to be enough machines for the sheer quantity of patients. Catheter tubes snaked down from the edge of a few of the beds, the plastic bags full of brown urine. An atmosphere of despair hung over the thin, bedridden bodies. She didn't want to look closer, to see the bed sores and other signs of neglect. On most of the bedside tables, rosary beads and flowers in various stages of decomposition were piled like altar offerings.

*Twenty-three.* At first, Jess thought she had the wrong room. The man in the first bed was lying on his side, curled in a fetal position. He looked old. Frail. She stepped closer. There were two other beds in the room, occupied by a sleeping woman and a man with a cast on his leg, too young to be George. She came around the foot of the bed.

It was George. Undeniably, heartbreakingly George. His lovely silver locks were gone, replaced by a hazy, halo-like stubble that was nearly invisible against his brown skull. The skin was stretched taut, his eyes sunken. And something was wrong with his face—an unbalance. His right eye and the right side of his mouth twisted down in a Joker's grimace.

"George —George, it's me," she said.

His eyes opened. He looked at her, blinked. She took his hand. It was too light. Cold. The veins stood out like twisted lines on a map. He spoke. His voice was barely above a whisper, the words slurred.

"I don't understand," Jess said. "Speak more slowly."

George tried again. A word: *Mija*.

A wave of relief washed over her. George, her George, was still in there.

"That's right! It's me. I'm here."

He spoke slowly, with effort. He resisted the half of his body that had rebelled against him. "You. came."

Tears dripped down his cheeks, and Jess wiped them away with her palm. Her own cheeks were wet, but she wasn't sure if it was from joy or sadness.

"Yes. I came, " she said. "Are you okay?" She regretted it as soon as she said it. George was not okay. He would not be okay, not here. She knew enough about strokes to know he needed exercise, food, attention. Here, there couldn't be more than one nurse for every twenty or thirty patients. No matter how selfless these nuns were, all they could really do for George was feed him and keep him clean. There could be no rehabilitation here, only a steady, unnecessary decline. She thought of her mother's broken body, lying on a hospital bed for the last three weeks of her life, dependent on machines for her air, her food, her life. She couldn't let that happen to George. The hopelessness of this place would eat away at him until there was nothing left.

His hand clutched hers, pressing the bones painfully together.

"*Mija. Home. Peace.*" It took her a moment to realize he was begging. *Please*, not *peace*. His hand grew insistent. His whole body shook with the effort of holding on. He still had strength left —her hand would ache tomorrow. In his brown eyes, a fierce determination.

"Okay, George," she said. "Okay."

He eased back onto the cot and released her hand. One side of his mouth twisted up in a grotesque imitation of a smile. The smile broke Jess' heart.

"Visiting hours have finished," a nun said from the doorway. She had a stack of clean bed sheets in her hand.

"*Don. Leaf,*" George said. He lifted his good arm as if to block her way.

"I have to," Jess said. "But I'll be back tomorrow, okay? I promise."

But George wasn't listening. He'd curled himself back into a fetal position with his back to her, and closed his eyes.

#

Jess came back the next day for visiting hours. She brought a sandwich —peanut butter and jelly, his favorite. Miguel had driven her to the big supermarket in town, the only one she knew of that sold foreign goods. A jar of peanut butter had cost seven dollars, but she didn't care. She knew George had fond memories of his childhood in the States. He'd always kept peanut butter and jelly in the Tree House fridge, and sometimes they'd eaten the sandwiches together after a day of diving.

He had trouble holding the sandwich, so Jess tore off bite-sized pieces and put them into his mouth. The prune-faced nun, Hermana Josefina, hovered by the door. She handed Jess a towel so she could wipe George's mouth. With half his mouth still weak, bits of sandwich dribbled from one corner and fell onto the front of his pajamas.

For the first time, Hermana Josefina smiled. Her teeth were grey, but the smile softened the harsh angles of her face. "He has a good appetite today," she said. "It's good you have come. We've prayed for him."

"Thank you," Jess said. The nun's kindness filled her with guilt over what she was about to do.

She waited for the nun to resume her duties before she commandeered the empty wheelchair. It took her a minute to find the brake release above the wheel, but she made it back into George's room before anyone could see. The other two patients were both asleep.

"George? Can you stand up?"

He mumbled something and swung his feet over the edge of the bed.

Jess reached an arm around him to lift him into a sitting position. His bones felt brittle, as if the force of her arms could shatter them. He'd lost too much weight, and it was surprisingly easy to support him as he shuffled over to the wheelchair. His steps were wobbly, but he could walk; that was good.

Jess poked her head back out into the hall. Only patients; the nuns must be in the rooms. Time to go.

She took the handles of the wheelchair and pushed George down the hall. Fast, but not running. Running would attract too much attention. She doubted they would stop her, but she didn't want to fill out paperwork, or answer questions.

She maneuvered around the other people in wheelchairs: a woman with a bandage around one eye; the old man who had called her an angel. The bare floors and aura of hopelessness were so unlike the crisp efficiency of American hospitals, but also the same. *Same-same, but different.* Jess wanted to escape with all of the patients, but there was nowhere else for them to go. She understood the hardness on the faces of the nuns now. They had seen too much; the hospital was in a war zone, albeit the slow, corrosive kind, the kind you didn't see on the news. It washed up onshore in a tsunami and left people behind like debris. Nobody cared about these people; they had been left. To be healed, or to die.

"Where are you going?"

The nun at the reception area had stood up. Her hands were on her hips.

Jess' heart leapt into her throat. "I'm —I'm taking my father for a walk."

The nun pursed her lips. "You have to sign out."

"Of —of course," Jess said. "*Lo siento.*"

She went to the clipboard —still tied to the desk —and wrote the fake name, George's name, and the time: 10:23 a.m.

"No more than ten minutes," the nun said. "It's hot today, and your father isn't well."

"I understand," Jess said.

She wondered if her precautions had been unnecessary; it was surprisingly easy to steal a human being.

The city air outside was delicious compared to the stench of the hospital. She pushed the wheelchair forward until they were out of eyeshot.

"*Pisonbek,*" George said.

Jess leaned in. "What?"

George's brow furrowed. "*Pison. Bake.*"

He was smiling his crooked smile, and in his eyes was the old George. Trapped by his own body, but in there, waiting to come out.

"Prison Break!" Jess shouted, and laughed. "Yep. You and me, we're like Cool Hand Luke. Not going back without a fight."

Miguel was parked along the curb. He turned on the taxi's engine and helped lift George onto the back passenger seat. As soon as he was settled, George's head bobbed down into his chest, asleep.

Miguel folded the wheelchair and put it in the trunk. Jess felt bad about the theft, but figured someday she'd find a way to return it. Or maybe she'd send a charitable donation. Anonymously, of course.

#

At the *El Viajero Hotel*, Miguel lifted George easily into his wheelchair.

"Do you need me tomorrow, *Señorita*?" Miguel asked.

"Are you free all day?"

The *taxista* wiped his round face with a handkerchief. "I can drive you and your father. Wherever you want to go."

"Come at seven," Jess said. "We're going to La Ceiba."

Miguel nodded, and a moment later, the taxi was reabsorbed into the city traffic.

#

The hotel was an unremarkable place on an unremarkable street, one of those worn-out, has-been hotels that were always the same, no matter what country you were in. The kind of place with coverlets pockmarked by cigarette burns and an air conditioner that rattled with each wheezy gust of cold air. The kind with damp and tacky carpets and rusty tubs. Now, a refuge.

Jess pushed George into the room and closed the door. The noise of the city became a distant hum, soon erased by the overarching buzz of the air conditioner.

George was awake again. The reality of her situation came crashing down on her. She didn't know the first thing about taking care of a stroke patient. How was she going

to feed him, to bathe him? She smelled it then, the acrid, unmistakable odor of urine. A dark stain on the front of his pajama pants. *Fuck*, she thought.

"Sorry," George said, and she could see he was humiliated by this betrayal of his own body.

"It's no big deal," Jess said with faux cheer. "We'll just clean you up."

Cleaning George up was not as easy as she'd hoped. It took at least twenty minutes for her to remove his clothes. His efforts to help only got him more tangled in the thin hospital pajamas.

He was as embarrassed by his own nudity as she was to see it. He tried to cover his genitals with his hands, but he had to reach out to keep himself from falling as Jess maneuvered him into the tub. She tried to ignore his sour-milk-and sweat-smell, the way his hands shook, the flaccid, old-man penis dangling between his legs. She tried not to touch the ribs that pressed out from the skin of his chest as if trying to escape. She tried not to think about what she would do if he shit himself or wet the bed.

When he was in the tub, she put a hand towel over his lap. His modesty thus re-established, he relaxed.

Jess turned on the shower. "Ah! Cold!" George shouted, and Jess scrambled to point the shower head towards the wall.

"Sorry!" She waited for the water to get lukewarm, then pointed the spray back down. She rinsed him off, then switched off the shower and let the tub fill. After a moment's thought, she rubbed soap on another hand towel and prepared to scrub George down with that.



He shoved her arm away. "I can. Do it," he said. It was getting easier to translate George's stroke-slurred speech. It reminded Jess of the early days of her travels, before the incident with Melissa Anderson, when she'd still been learning Spanish. She'd had to listen with intense concentration to every word the speaker said. It was like listening to a radio being tuned—at first you heard only static, then a word here and there, and then full sentences formed, like magic, out of the noise.

"Sure George." She handed him the towel, but he gave her an exasperated look and waved her away.

"Right. But call me if you need anything."

She left the bathroom and paced. She listened for any sound of sloshing water, any sign of distress. She remembered hearing somewhere that a person could drown in just two inches of water. Was he strong enough to pull himself up?

Her worries were unfounded. After ten minutes, he called her name. His skin was clean and freshly scrubbed, and he was smiling.

"You missed a spot," she said. She took the towel and scrubbed his back, then drained the tub and rinsed him off again. She handed him a towel and used another to pat dry his head. The stubble there matched the growing shadow on his face. She hadn't thought to buy a razor.

It took nearly all her strength to get him back into the wheelchair. She put towels around his shoulders and over his legs to keep him warm while she retrieved the clothes she'd bought for him.

"Sorry," George said.

"For what?"

He shook his head. She understood: he was sorry for all of it. For making her come back, for making her take care of him.

His lopsided frown trembled. She hoped he wouldn't cry again. She told him the usual comforting things, about how everything was going to be all right, about how he would get better soon, and how he would be his old self again in no time. All the while thinking: *I'm in trouble. Big, big trouble.*

To get George dressed, she got him seated on the edge of the bed and told him what to do with a military exactness her real father would have loved.

"Raise your arms. Good. Down. Good. Lift your leg. Good." The clothes she'd bought him looked ridiculous on his slender frame: oversized sweat pants, a t-shirt with the *Imperial* logo on the front, and oversized blue Crocs. It was the best she'd been able to do in her hour at the roadside market, but at least everything fit.

Seeing in him clothes again was a relief. There'd been something repulsive about the frailty of his body, the concavity of his stomach, the undulating protuberances of his ribs. Not to mention the absurdity of seeing him naked. How had she thought she could handle this alone? The problem was that she didn't have a plan for after. George was her last tie to her mother's life, and she couldn't have left him to die alone in that house of horrors. Even so, she hadn't thought much about what she would do with him once she got him out.

She made him eat something —peanut butter and jelly again —then cracked open a bottle of water. As he sipped, a stream of water drooled down the side of his face.

He collapsed back into the pillows and fell asleep. His mouth gaped open, and if not for the steady rise and fall of his chest under the sheet, he could have been dead.

While he slept, Jess went out and bought cigarettes and a bottle of *guaro*, a Honduran liquor made from sugar cane. It was the only thing the shop had besides beer, and she was in the mood for something stronger. The hotel room had a tiny balcony with a folding chair and a rail that reached almost to chest height. Outside, the air was humid and warm. A dozen wall air conditioners buzzed like a swarm of mechanical bees. Below, an alley with garbage cans, where a few stray dogs picked through the refuse.

Jess cracked open the bottle and took a sip. The force of the liquor made her cough, but the ensuing warmth emanated along her nerve endings in a soothing fire. It was too sweet for her tastes, but it would do. She didn't want to get too drunk, in case George needed her, but she couldn't stay sober, not today.

At her feet, she set down the blue box with the ashes of her father. It seemed better than drinking alone. Fitting, that her only suitable company should be the dead.

"I can't do this," she told the box. "I thought I could, but I can't. I don't know what I'm doing." She kept her voice low, aware of the strangeness of talking to herself. Would a casual observer think her mad? No, they'd probably think she was talking into some unseen Bluetooth device. A phone call to the dead. The *guaro* helped; it blunted the sharp edges of her thoughts. She lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift out over the humming urban cityscape. She was a social smoker, but today she relished the sharp sulfur smell of the matches, the thoughtfulness that came with watching her smoky exhalations rise up and merge with the Honduran night. In the buildings all around her,

people were getting on with their lives. They cooked dinner and washed clothes and had sex and did what everyone did at night, in every corner of the world.

"It's your fault, you know," she told the box. "I was never normal, because of you. Do you remember that time when you took me out of the base school in Alabama because the kids were bullying me? They used to put thumbtacks on my chair. You got pissed. You called the teacher an irresponsible bitch. I'd never heard you curse before. You put me in that private school, the really nice one off base. That place was like another world. I'm sure I told you about it. It was surreal. Everyone was so fucking nice—the kids were nice, the teacher was nice. For two weeks, I felt like I'd finally found a place I belonged. I even made a friend. I don't remember his name—but I remember he had freckles, and this giant cloud of red hair. Like a clown. He was nice, too. And then one day you show up and say you've got a mission and you send me to that boarding school in San Bernadino. You didn't even let me say good-bye to my friends—you must have thought it would be less traumatic. Or maybe you didn't care. I begged and begged for you to let me stay, but you said that you'd be gone a year, this time, and you needed a place that could keep me twenty-four-seven. Do you remember that boarding school? The one with the bars on all the windows? I do. Nobody was nice there. I told you that, but when I asked to go somewhere else you told me it would toughen me up. And hey, it worked. I'm tough. I'm so goddamn tough. You'd be fucking proud. I'm so tough I don't need anyone."

Her voice cracked on the last word; she knew it was stupid, this wallowing in self pity. *Wah, I had a tough childhood.* She'd had enough to eat. So what if nobody had loved her? There were worse problems in the world.

Jess clinked the bottle against the side of the box.

"Cheers," she said. "Good thing I got you, Pop. It's not good to drink alone. A person might start talking to herself."

Later, she crawled into bed next to George. She was drunker than she'd meant to be, but not nearly drunk enough. With her equilibrium gone, the bed seemed to sway, hammock-like, from one side of the room to the other. She dozed off and on, starting awake each time with the certainty that she was falling. Finally, in the hour before dawn, she fell into a deeper sleep, lulled by George's wheezing snores. The sound of each breath was like the susurrations of waves against a distant, rocky shore.

#

In the morning, she poured the rest of the *guaro* down the bathroom sink. No more moping. If her traveling life had taught her anything, it was that you had to keep going. One step in front of the other. You could always return to a place you'd been before, but no matter how hard you tried, the person you had been then was gone.

As promised, Miguel picked them up at seven and drove them the two-and-a-half hours to La Ceiba. She paid him at the ferry dock, and he could have left, but he insisted on helping her get George onto the ferry.

"You're a good man, Miguel," she said when it was time for him to go. She shook his hand, and his expressionless face flushed with embarrassment. He shifted from foot

to foot, then reached into the back pocket of his jeans and handed her a card. Miguel Esperanza. His last name, translated, meant *Hope*.

"If you need to go anywhere, *señorita*, you call me. *Dios te bendiga*," he said. God bless you.

She watched him drive away from the ferry's window. She became so easily attached to the strangers she met on the road. She barely knew most of them. They were like fireflies, providing a fleeting burst of light that left behind only a halo, a memory of brightness.

"Home," George said. The tinted glass reflected his grizzled face —she would need to do something about that.

"About your place. George, it's falling apart. You can't go back there. But this real estate guy, Cardona, says there's a company that would pay a lot of money for the land there. You could sell, rent something smaller, work on getting better."

"No."

"George —"

"My house."

"I know it's yours, but would you listen to me for a second? You can't live there. The whole fucking roof fell in."

George let out a puff of air. He shook his head, and she could see he was disappointed in her.

"Go away," he said, speaking slowly to be understood. "Can take care of. My self."

"Don't be an ass. You can't even walk."

George stood up. His body swayed. "I can walk!" he shouted. A family sitting nearby stopped what they were doing to stare.

Jess reached out both arms to steady him. "I know you can, George. But there's no place to go right now, all right?"

George relented. He sat back down and leaned his head against the tinted window. The reflective surface gave the illusion of two George's, one leaning against the other.

8

"Home," George insisted, again.

Jess sighed and looked through the grimy window of the cab, seeing nothing.

He tugged at the sleeve of her t-shirt. She heard a soft tearing sound as one of the seams threatened to give way.

"Damn it, George! Let up, would you? I can't take you home. Not until you're better."

"Now," George said. He slammed his fists against the seat back in front of him.

"Now!"

They passed into Sandy Bay, and Jess told the *taxista* to stop. The driver was young—overweight, but broad-shouldered. She explained what she wanted him to do, and handed him a twenty-dollar bill.

She pointed to the path. Unexpectedly, he swerved the taxi off the road and into the weeds. He rolled over the large *A Vender/For Sale* sign that had been stuck into the dirt. They bumped over rocks and plants and dirt; Jess used one arm to hold George in his seat, the other to grip the handle of the passenger door. At the bottom of the slope, the driver popped the trunk and took out George's wheelchair. They got him into the chair, but the wheels caught in the loose dirt. They each took a side. Like Biblical litter-bearers, they carried the wheelchair to the base of the stairs.

George's face didn't change expression as he took it all in: the sagging roof, the peeling paint.

"Up," he said.

"I can't get your wheelchair up those stairs. We'll come back when you're stronger."

She tried to turn the wheelchair around, but George grabbed the brake and held firm.

"Up."

"For Christ's sake —"

"I want. See my house," he said. "Now." He tried to push the wheelchair forward, but his arms didn't have their old strength. He came close to tipping himself face-first onto the ground.

"We're going back," she said, but George's hand went back to the brake. An impasse.



The driver stepped forward. "Let me," he said. In one smooth motion, he scooped George into his arms.

"What are you doing?" Jess began, but the driver was already moving up the stairs to the house. George's legs dangled in the crook of the man's arms like a bride being taken across the threshold.

Jess folded the wheelchair and brought it up the steps. The driver set George back on the seat and wiped the sweat from his face.

"You call me when you ready," he said. He went down the stairs, sat on the bottom step, and started typing something into a cell phone.

George pointed down. "Spare key. There."

Jess knelt and lifted the board. Underneath, a hollow with spider webs and a bronze key. Jess tapped on the wood to scare off the spiders, then got the key and opened the front door.

The wheels scraped the paint on the doorway, but she got the wheelchair through the narrow door frame. Inside, a familiar dank smell assaulted her nose —damp furniture and mildew and rotting things.

"My. House," George said. He leaned forward in the chair. His fingers brushed the soiled edge of a ruined notebook. His lopsided mouth was open, his eyes moist.

She'd tried to warn him. She'd tried.

He mumbled something.

"What?"

"First fire. Then flood," he said. She knew he was thinking of the photography studio that he'd lost in 1989. For all his talk of a loving universe, it sure seemed the universe had a vendetta against him.

He wheeled himself into the bedroom. All of it unchanged since her last visit.

Jess gestured to a stack of plastic-wrapped notebooks. "These ones are okay . . ." Her voice trailed off.

George closed his eyes and let his head sink into the palms of his hand. The posture of a weeping angel.

"Out," he said. He didn't need to ask again. Jess called for the driver.

#

He didn't want to talk on the way back. Her inquiries were met with one-word responses or grunts.

It was all arranged: a ground floor apartment a short ways back from the beach, not far from the Paradise. Bobby had even made a makeshift ramp out of a piece of plywood so Jess could roll George up the three steps that led up onto the front patio. Two rooms, no a/c. A hotplate, a mini-fridge, and a sink in the main living area which would double as George's bedroom. A bathroom with a cold water shower. As good a place as any for George to recover.

She got him situated on the bed, propped up with pillows so he could look outside at the sand yard. There was no TV, and she made a mental note to pick up some books for him to read at one of the hotel book exchanges. Maybe some of the books in the Tree House were still okay, too. She'd check later.

"Are you going to be okay for an hour or two? I have some errands to run," she said.

He made a noncommittal *mmm*-sound and continued looking outside.

She took a bottle of water out of the mini-fridge and set it on the bedspread next to him. "Do you still have the phone?"

He patted his right front breast pocket, which bulged with a rectangular shape. In San Pedro Sula, she'd bought two rechargeable phones, the kind they were always calling *burner phones* on cop shows. She'd given one phone to George, with the number of the other phone —hers —on speed dial.

"Good. Call me if you need anything."

#

It was relief to be alone again. She'd never been particularly maternal, and caring for another human being all day was exhausting. That morning, she'd gone to the net café and Googled "mild stroke recovery." She'd read through dozens of web sites. Parts of George's brain were now dead, unrecoverable. Other parts would have to compensate for the loss. He had some mild paralysis of one side and his speech was slurred, but it could have been worse. Much worse. He might not ever be the old George again, not completely, but he could get close. If he would cooperate, that was. He was upset about the Tree House, but he'd get over it. At least, she hoped he would.

Bobby was sitting at one of the bar's beachfront tables, his feet propped up on a plastic chair.

"How's that place working out for you? All right?"

"It's perfect. I think we'll be staying for a while. You got a discount if we stay a month?"

Bobby ran a hand over his chin. "Well, I charge four hundred by the week, tourist price," he said. "But it's been slow. How's five hundred?"

"For the month?"

"For the month."

A ridiculously cheap price —she suspected it was motivated by pity, but she didn't protest.

"Done."

They shook on it.

Bobby stretched and got up. "These tables won't clean themselves," he said with a sigh.

"I'll help," she said.

Bobby pulled another rag out of his back pocket and tossed it to her. "I never say no to free labor."

Jess began wiping the days' accumulation of sand dust and food debris from the tabletops. As she worked, Bobby told her about his wife, his kids, and the steady expansion of his bar into a hotel and restaurant. They talked about how the island had changed during the five years she was absent.

She loved listening to his island English, the soft vowels and occasional Spanish words like a potpourri of sound. Although most people on the island spoke Spanish and English, English was the first language of the black islanders, descendants of native

Garifuna people and emancipated British slaves. There were still tensions between them and the Spanish-speaking Hondurans, many of whom came from the mainland seeking to take advantage of the island's constant stream of tourists. The black islanders considered themselves true Roataners, descended as they were from native people, and many resented the influx of mainlanders who didn't speak English. From what Jess could tell, the Spanish-speaking Hondurans didn't like the way the black islanders were more prosperous—they owned most of the shops on the island, and considerably more of the profitable beachfront property.

Religion made up the most significant dividing line between them: the black islanders were mostly Baptists, while the Spanish-speaking islanders were mostly Catholic. There were two Baptist churches on West End road. On Saturday nights, Jess would walk through West End and listen to the English-language church hymns,;the deep-voiced exclamations of the preacher; the ecstatic exhortations of *Hallelujah!* and *Amen!* Jess had longed to step inside: just once, to be a part of the crowd. The more time she spent with the black islanders, though, the more self-conscious she became of her own whiteness, her own privilege. They didn't have the same opportunities. Even if they wanted to travel, for most of them, places like Thailand were little more than fantasies viewed through a television screen, as real as a *telenovela*. Yes, she could go into the church, but there were other walls than those of wood and glass.

Bobby grew up during the worst of it, in the eighties, a time when the black islanders were the dominant group, and Spanish-speaking mainlanders flocked to the island, looking to capitalize on the emerging tourist trade.

"I remember so good, " he said. "The black people saw Spanish people and they beat them and sent them to the mainland all beat up. People got killed. Then everything changed. We black people, we started to marry the Spanish, and the Spanish people married the black. Then everything started changing. Now what happened? Everybody's together. Everything changes."

He didn't mention whites, because he didn't have to. Tourists came and went. The foreign divemasters and instructors made up a tiny, if powerful, minority. And they mostly kept to themselves —a bubble of diver culture.

"Don't you resent us?" Jess asked.

"No," Bobby said. "All these dive shops over here. They're supposed to have at least one guy from the island, a divemaster. But the guys here, they don't want to work. They'd rather be at home, smoking the rock, or doing nothing. I don't understand it." Bobby was convinced many islanders' failure to thrive was a result of laziness, but Jess didn't agree. Yes, drugs were a real problem on the island, and there was a lack of ambition that came with limited educational opportunities. But she also knew dive training cost thousands of dollars. Her equipment alone had cost twelve hundred dollars, an expense that was simply not possible for an islander working for ten dollars a day. The end result was that there were only one or two Honduran divemasters on the island; the rest were all from somewhere else. Bobby's optimistic view of race relations painted a pretty picture of the world, and maybe that made it easier for him to get on with the business of living. But the frequency of assault and murder on the island spoke to older, deeper racial and cultural tensions that couldn't be so easily eradicated by Bobby's

kumbayah philosophy. Roatan was not a perfect place, but no place was perfect. Was it any better than the suburbs where her father had lived, where each house's exterior had been a lie?

Jess finished the last table, and handed Bobby the rag.

"Thanks for the help," he said. He turned as if to head back up to the bar, then paused. "You used to work for those Italians, right? Over there in West Bay? They know you came back?"

"The only person who knows I'm back is you," Jess said. "Why?"

"Well, I'm only telling you this because we're friends. I heard a while back those Italians got fired from that resort because of what happened."

Jess cursed inwardly. She'd hoped Paolo and Federica would have long ago forgotten about the incident. She'd never really believed they would get fired because of her. She would inevitably run into them again, and it wouldn't be pretty.

"Now, now, don't look at me like that —" Bobby said, mistaking her anxiety for anger. He waved his hands in front of his chest. "I'm not accusing you of nothing. They was here once, after it happened, and I overheard some things. All I'm saying is, you'd better be careful if you see them."

Jess' stomach twisted. "Thanks for letting me know. Will there be dancing tonight?"

Bobby laughed. "There's always dancing. Come by, when Mr. George is asleep. You're too young to be so serious."

She thanked him and made her way down the sand road. She'd procrastinated long enough; it was time to pay Ernesto Cardona a visit.

9

Cardona wasn't pleased. His moist fingertips left oily smears on the places where he tapped impatient rhythms into the glass desktop.

"I'm glad to hear your father has recovered," he said. Jess could tell from the tone in his voice that he was not glad. No, he was not glad at all.

"As I'm sure you understand, I want you to take the house off the market." She shifted in her chair and tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress the frenzied beating of her heart. She'd never liked confrontation. It reminded her too much of her confrontations with her father —always an exercise in futility.

"I am afraid I can't do that."

"Why not? He's back. The house is his."

"No, it belongs to the island of Roatan." Cardona made a clucking sound with his tongue. Today, he was wearing blue khakis and a pink polo shirt. Tufts of chest hair poked out above the open collar of the shirt.

"What do you mean?"

"Your *father*," —he emphasized the word —*Shit*, Jess thought, *he knows* — "didn't pay his *hipoteca*."

"*Hipoteca*?" she asked. She almost laughed. She knew the word couldn't mean hippopotamus, but it was the only translation her overworked brain could come up with.



"You call it a *mortgage* in English. He didn't pay . . . for several years. He also owes approximately two thousand dollars in property taxes. I'm sorry, but the authorities have taken possession of the home. I'm authorized to sell it."

Cardona wasn't sorry. All that was missing was for him to twist the ends of his mustache like an old-timey villain. Jess wanted to punch him in his not-sorry face.

She'd known George was broke. Of course she'd known. He'd been in a Catholic hospital, the kind for charity cases. If he'd had money, or health insurance, he might have been flown to the States for treatment. His dual citizenship would have allowed him that. But George had given up on America long ago, when his photography studio had gone up in smoke. She'd hoped —beyond reason —that he still had some money stashed away somewhere. Now she understood his insistence on his book, his proclamations that his masterpiece would sell for a million dollars. His book was his Hail Mary, his fantasy of last-minute redemption. It had allowed him to ignore the reality of the bills and past due notices piling up on his doorstep. Like an idiot, she'd imagined that bringing George back would solve everything.

*First fire, then flood.*

"What's the asking price?"

Maybe George could get a loan. Or she could buy it. She'd never wanted her father's money anyway. It had done nothing but weigh her down as effectively as that current at The Wall.

"There are other buyers interested. The listing price has increased since you were last here."

Cardona gave his used-car-salesman smile.

"I want to make an offer," she said. She knew the economic crisis in Honduras had created a buyer's market on Honduras. Even waterfront properties were selling for cheap. Maybe she could afford it. Maybe . . .

Cardona stood up. "I'm afraid only Honduran nationals are able to own property here. And Señor Moreno is not competent to make decisions on his own behalf."

He came around the desk. "I'd like to help you, but we both know that you are not Señor Moreno's daughter."

An involuntary flush crept into Jess' cheeks. She knew Cardona, or men like him. Always with the intimidation, the need to prove one's manliness by making others feel small. The old rage threatened at the edge of her vision —*Murderer-Murderer-Murderer*—but she swallowed it down.

"You can't to sell it without his permission," she said. Her own voice sounded pathetic in her ears; the voice of a child begging her parents for a candy.

"I'm afraid I can," Cardona said. He picked up a pile of papers and placed them in her hand. "You should look these over. You'll see it shows the island of Roatan has foreclosed on Jorge Moreno's property. It's now owned by the *Banco Central de Honduras*." His smile widened. Hook, line, sinker.

The papers crumpled in Jess' fist. "Why are you doing this?"

His eyebrows lifted. "I'm sorry?"

"Why not just sell me the house? What did I ever do to you?"

His smile was smug. "It isn't anything you *did*, Miss whatever-your-name-is. It's what you *are*. Now, I'm afraid I have other work to do," he said. "If you'll excuse me?"

#

George was still looking out the window when she got back. He was watching some children play soccer on the sand outside. The ball they were using was half-deflated, but no one seemed to mind.

"Bathroom?" she asked.

"Went already."

"You could've fallen and hurt yourself. You should've waited for me."

No response. Jess gave up and placed the two Styrofoam containers on the bed.

"I brought dinner. I went to the chicken place, the one you told me about. I remember you saying how much you liked it. Half a chicken with potato salad, right?" She opened the box and put it on his lap. She unwrapped a plastic fork and wedged it between his fingers.

George dropped the fork and didn't pick it up.

"Come on, George. Try." She put the fork back in his hand. He speared a chunk of potato salad onto the plastic tines, but when he lifted the fork to his lips, the potato salad slid off onto the bedspread.

"Shit," he said. He slammed the fork down. The fork snapped in two, and the chicken container tipped over. A chicken leg made greasy tracks down the bedspread.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Jess snapped. "Stop acting like a child. It takes time. And you're not going to get any better if you don't try."

George said something and slammed a fist into his thigh.

"What? You know I can't understand when you talk fast like that."

"Understand. This!" George said. He threw a handful of potato salad at her face. It landed above her eyebrow, held for a brief second, then fell.

Jess wiped mayonnaise from her face with the back of her hand. "I can't believe you did that," she said. On impulse, she grabbed a scoop of potato salad from her own container and pressed it into his face. Most of it dribbled down the sides of his nose, but a large glob caught in the pale stubble on his cheeks.

The silence that followed was like the absolute stillness after breaking glass. They looked at each other.

George threw his head back and laughed. Potato salad dribbled down his face and onto the bedspread. Jess' own laughter came next, and soon she was laughing so hard her stomach hurt and tears poured down her cheeks.

"I —can't —breathe," she said.

"I'm hungry. What's for. Dinner?" George said, and that set them both off again.

The laughter dissipated. Jess got a towel from the bathroom to wipe her eyes and nose. She handed it to George so he could do the same. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard her insides hurt. She wanted to feel that breathlessness forever, to drown in her own mirth. But, as it always did, the feeling passed.

They ate the sorry remnants of their chicken dinner. George ate his with his fingers; Jess didn't comment.

Later, Jess helped George outside so they could watch the last bit of color fade from the horizon. The children went home for the night, and the beach grew dark. Above the canopy of mango trees, Orion became visible, the stars like dim cousins to the man-made lights of the fishing trawlers that prowled the oil-black surface of the sea.

Jess' fingers itched to smoke, but she'd done too much of that lately. She pressed two fingers to her lips, inhaled, and blew empty air up to the stars.

"I don't know what to do, George," she said.

His fingers wrapped around her own. His she could feel the ridges of his bones beneath the thin barrier of his skin.

"We'll figure it out," he said.

#

At dawn, she swam out to the reef. In the apartment closet, she'd found some old snorkeler gear Bobby kept on hand for the tourist renters. She needed to be in water. To think; to plan.

Even as a child, she'd loved the water. Her memories of her first swim were hazy—she remembered only fractured blue light, weightlessness, the sound of children laughing. And later: diving down and touching her cheek against the rough bottom of a pool. The desire to sink deeper than the confines of the pool allowed; to dive into the earth itself.

On the nameless beach, the water lapped the sand in rhythmic patterns. She walked out until it was deep enough, then pushed off. Sea grass tickled her skin, then the bottom dropped away. Bobby's fins were full-footed, not as comfortable as her own fins.

She could already feel the places on her feet where the blisters would form. Maybe tomorrow she'd retrieve her gear bag from the closet at the Tree House. They'd have to get everything out anyway, before Cardona had a chance to clear it all away.

She propelled herself away from the beach. In the distance, dead coral jutted up out of the water in a line that was broken by brighter shades of blue —gaps, places where only small skiffs could pass through. She rolled onto her back and sought out the yellow house. If she drew a straight line from there to the reef, she'd hit Blue Channel — a narrow passage through the reef. She followed the imaginary line out.

On her way, she passed several yachts tied to buoys along the reef. All was quiet; either the occupants were asleep or they had gone into West End for better lodgings. More boats would come later. Blue Channel was the most popular dive site in West End, despite the fact that the constant traffic of divers and snorkelers had killed off most of the coral. In an hour or two, snorkelers would clutter the surface while divers traced the contours of the reef from below. But not even the early boats would push off until eight. For now, the reef was hers.

She almost missed the channel. One mass of coral looked much like the next, and it was easy to get lost. All at once, the bottom rose up, and it was too shallow. Only a few inches of water separated the coral from the surface. She popped her head up above the water. She'd veered off course, away from the line of sight of the yellow house that sat on the shore. She retraced her path, and finally spotted the trough of sea grass and sand that marked the channel's entrance.

The sea floor began its slow decline. On either side of her, walls of coral rose up like great cliffs. The dead and living coral formed cave-like overhangs. Jess took a deep breath and dove down and under one of them.

It was dark in the shadow of the rock. The dead coral was still coated in a thin carpet of living things —red, yellow, and green splotches, like a painter's palette. Some previous divers' exhalations remained trapped on the underbelly of the overhang. They formed a sheath of tiny bubbles. She didn't see any big fish, even though the overhangs were a popular spot for lionfish —a beautiful, if invasive, species that preferred to hide in darkness during daylight hours.

Her lungs ached; she flew back to the surface for air. She continued down the channel, then dived again, deeper this time. Her body resisted her; she was too buoyant. If she went skin diving like this again, she'd need to get a weight belt with a couple of pounds on it. Many of the male dive instructors she'd known were natural skin divers: their bodies were all muscle and bone, so they sank. Most women —thanks to breasts and other strategic placements of body fat —were positively buoyant. To Jess, however, this was not a disadvantage. The trade-off was that her body was well insulated; even without a wetsuit, it would be a long time before she felt cold. She could also tread water for a long time without much effort. During her divemaster training swim tests, her instructors had made her tread water with a weight in either hand. To level the playing field, they said.

She took another deep breath and dived. This time, she held onto a rock to prevent herself from bobbing back up. She stayed down as long as she could. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture the old stillness, the calm of the dive.

It didn't work. Each time she tried to relax, her lungs reminded her of the distance between herself and air.

She swam on. She saw a green turtle chomping on a barrel sponge; legions of large-eyed squirrelfish and black and yellow-striped sergeant majors. The channel dropped down and away —twenty feet, maybe thirty. It got harder to reach the bottom without immediately having to come up again. Her lungs were out of shape, and she missed the comfort of having a tank strapped to her back.

How deep was the bottom now —forty feet? Could she make it? She didn't know. She took several hyperventilated breaths, twisted her body into a ball, then turned to let the weight of her legs and feet carry her down. The coral below grew large and came into focus. Nothing to see but the usual reef fish. She gripped a rock with one hand and rolled onto her back.

Overhead, the surface was brilliant with reflected sun, a kaleidoscope in hues of blue. It was too easy, as a diver, to forget that the surface existed.

Halfway back, her lungs burned. She swam faster, growing lightheaded. As soon as her face broke the surface, she inhaled air in great gulps. Her heart was pounding, and the air was sweet and pure and wonderful.

It was enough. She floated on the surface for an indeterminate time. Her plan for what she was going to do —about the house, about George —washed over her like the



caress of the sun on her skin. Out here, her problems were insignificant. She was alive, and George was alive, and that was all that mattered. *We'll figure it out*, he'd said, and crazy as it was, she believed him.

A buzzing grew louder in her water-logged ears: a boat, coming closer. Knowing the captain might not see her lying flat in the water—an inglorious way to die—she lifted her fins up and out of the water. The boat slowed and curved around her. A tourist catamaran, laden with snorkelers. Twenty or thirty people with bulky orange life-jackets strapped around their necks stared down at her from the deck. They examined Jess as if she was some new, previously-unheard-of sea life.

"You all right?" someone called.

Jess treaded water and aligned her body with the shore.

"I'm just fine," she said. To her surprise, it was the truth.

### Part III: Ascent

1

*El Doctor* lived down a gravel road off Half Moon Bay beach, in a concrete building that had once been painted white, but now had the grey hue of rotting teeth. He was not a hard man to find. All the foreign dive instructors and divemasters on the island knew him. Divers were considered itinerant, part-time workers. Drifters. They lived perpetually off of 90-day visas, and if they didn't want to make the expensive, arduous two-day trek to the border at Nicaragua or Belize to renew their visa every 3 months, *El Doctor*, or someone like him, was the only choice. Two hundred dollars bought you a brand new, bright yellow visa sheet scrawled with an illegible signature and stapled to the inside of your passport. Jess used to get her visas from a tourist boat captain called Captain Roy, but he'd drifted away to somewhere else a year ago and no one knew when, or if, he'd be back. That was island life —like a whirlpool, some people got caught in the eddies, and others got whirled away downstream.

Jess went up the stairs to the apartment and knocked on the door. Silence. She knocked again, louder, and this time she heard the shuffling sound of someone moving around.

"*Ya voy*," a male voice said. The door swung open.

*El Doctor* stood in sweatpants, his chest bare except for the smattering of tattoos she remembered, vaguely, from another night on the island. He stared at her blankly, and Jess had to stifle a twinge of disappointment. Why should he remember? She'd probably

been no more than a one-night stand in a long string of one-night stands. Even to her, their night at the Paradise Hotel felt like a lifetime ago.

"Hello, Mateo," she said.

She saw it, then: the recognition. One corner of his mouth curled upwards in a wry smile.

"What are you doing back? I thought you were chased out of town with —what do you call them? —pitchforks. Jessica, wasn't it?"

"Jess. Good memory."

"For certain things," he replied. "What brings you to *mi casa*?"

"I have a business proposition. Is this a good time?"

"I always have time for business." He led her into the living room, which also doubled as a kitchen. A counter along one wall held the usual accoutrements of an island kitchen —a mini-fridge, a sink, and a hotplate. A wicker sofa and a coffee table took up most of the remaining space. Clothing was scattered about the room. On the table, rolling papers and tobacco debris.

"Have a seat," he said. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"Mateo? ¿Con quién estás hablando?" A woman stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She wore denim shorts, and an oversized t-shirt Jess guessed was Mateo's. Pretty, with a curtain of black hair that fell almost to her waist.

"*Buenas*," Jess said. The woman frowned.

"¿Quién es?" she said, not looking at Jess. *Who is it?*

"*Cliente*," Mateo scolded. He took the woman by the arm and led her back into the bedroom. Through the closed door, Jess could hear him speaking in irritated, if patient, tones. The woman pleading, resisting, and finally, capitulating.

While she waited, Jess took out the cell phone from the pocket of her khakis. George had promised to call if he needed anything, but she couldn't stop herself from checking that it was turned on and that she hadn't missed any calls.

Mateo and the woman came out of the bedroom. Mateo had put on a shirt, and the woman had brushed her hair and applied lip gloss to her lips. Before leaving, she kissed him on the lips—a peck, but a lingering one, as if to say, *this is mine*.

"Sorry about that," Mateo said when she was gone. He pulled a bag of tobacco out of his pocket and began rolling a cigarette. His hands were still long and delicate. *Artist's hands*—a long ago thought, echoing back. A shame he was with someone, but not surprising. People moved on. Yet another reason why it was never a good idea to look up one's former one night stands.

"Smoke?"

Jess shook her head and put the phone away. She took three one-hundred-dollar bills out of her pocket and placed them on the coffee table.

Mateo whistled through his teeth. "That's more than my usual fee. I only charge two-fifty for a visa."

"It was two hundred, last I checked."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You've been away a long time. Prices go up."

"I don't need a visa this time. As I recall, you're a man who's good at solving problems."

Mateo's rolled the tobacco-filled paper back and forth between his fingertips.

"Maybe I can, maybe I can't. Depends on the problem."

Jess leaned forward. "I need a Honduran passport."

"I see," Mateo said. He finished rolling the cigarette and pulled a Bic lighter out of his pocket. He lit the cigarette and took an introspective inhale.

"I've heard of people wanting an American passport," he said. "Those are expensive, and difficult to get. A Honduran passport . . . well. Easier, I think, but not easy. Why do you want it?"

"I want to buy a house, but I've been told I can't without Honduran nationality."

Mateo snorted. "Ha! Half the properties on this island are owned by rich Americans."

So Cardona had lied. *Asshole.*

"All you have to do is list yourself as a corporation. My country has always been a supporter of big business interests." Mateo put a hand over his heart and gave a mock bow.

"Okay, then I need help to become a corporation."

Mateo shrugged. "That's nothing. Should we call you Jess incorporated? Jess Limited?"

Jess paused, thinking, then said, "How about Tree House Industries?"

"Tree House? *Cómo quieres*. Is that all? You need my help to buy a house? You could have gone to a real estate agent for that."

"I already did. That's my other problem. But first, how soon can I be corporatized?"

"Soon." Mateo's cigarette dangled between his teeth as he scooped up the bills.

"A week, maybe two. Now, what's this other problem?"

One by one, she set five more hundred-dollar bills on the table.

"His name," she said, "is Ernesto Cardona."

2

"You —cocksucking —motherfucking —asshole!" With each word, Jess shoved.

George's waterlogged mattress didn't budge.

"Come *on!*" she shouted, and kicked out with one leg. The mattress wobbled, but remained stubbornly jammed in the doorway between the bedroom and the rest of the house. She tried moving to the other side and pushing. The mattress moved about two inches before it caught on something.

She sank to the floor and leaned against the wall.

"You win," she said.

It had taken three weeks for Tree House Industries to become a legitimate, or semi-legitimate, enterprise. No one asked what Tree House Industries did, or what its profit margins might be. No one cared.

She'd shown up at Cardona's office shortly thereafter to purchase the house.

Cardona was nervous when she arrived. He'd shifted in his chair. His eyes had darted to the door, as if at any minute someone might come charging in with a gun or a machete. She didn't know what Mateo had said to him. Although Mateo had told her that he was done with the drug trade—that night, five years ago, he'd been celebrating his retirement—he still had dangerous friends.

Her pen had paused over the sales contract. Did she really want to do this? Purchase a house? Stay on this island? She was thirty-three years old. She could still go back to the States, get a job, get a pension plan, save up for retirement, buy a car, get married, have a life. She tried to envision what that life would be like, but couldn't. Here, she had a purpose. George needed her; she could use the last of her father's money to buy the Tree House. Beachfront property was a good investment, or at least that's what every episode of House Hunters International insisted. And this place felt more like home than anywhere else she'd lived. It was a place awash with contradictions, like her.

The idea of staying put somewhere both thrilled and terrified her. No more aimless wandering, not that she could have sustained that forever anyway. She tried to remember waking up on that beach in Thailand—drunk, high, and desperately alone. It hadn't been fun, that feeling of being absent from her own life. There had been days she'd seriously thought that it might be better if she went out into the water and never came back. No, there could be no going back to that.

She'd signed the papers.

When she left Cardona's office, she'd heard the click of the door, locking behind her.

She'd hired a part-time nurse to help with George, a woman named Lucia who had worked at Roatan Hospital and knew how to work with stroke victims. They did speech therapy for at least an hour every day, and George's enunciation was much better already, although he might never talk with as much speed and fluidity as he used to. Every day, he and Lucia took walks up and down the beach. He had a mild limp, and he got tired easily, but each day, he made it a little farther. They had just enough money to re-build the Tree House, but she and George had argued about what to do with it. Jess' idea was to turn the downstairs into a tourist rental, with an apartment upstairs where they could live.

*Open a dive shop, George insisted. You could do it, Mija. I never saw anyone so good in the water as you. Like you were born there.*

She refused. She wouldn't risk another disaster.

They'd decide later. First, they had to clean out the house, salvage what could be salvaged, and throw the rest away. It was going to take months to repair the roof and the sagging wooden planks.

She gave up on the mattress and spent a couple of hours tossing anything that had gotten wet down to the ground below. The yard became cluttered with soggy notebooks and stained sofa pillows. All she accomplished was making a bigger mess than when she'd started.



She went into the kitchen. She opened the fridge, then slammed it shut, gagging. The electricity had been turned off long before, and everything inside had congealed or altered form into a patchwork quilt of mold. The noxious smell coated the inside of her nostrils. She stumbled outside onto the deck and leaned against the rail.

Two things crystallized in Jess' mind. First, if they were going to do this right, they were going to need help. Second, there wasn't going to be enough money, even if they did manage to turn the downstairs into a rental.

She was going to have to get a job.

3

"You speak English so *well*," the American woman said. She was middle-aged, with a maternal curve to her stomach and large breasts that expanded out from her sternum like a ship's figurehead.

"Thank you so much," Jess said. "Another Tropical Surprise?"

"Just one more, sweetie."

Jess was used to being mistaken for a Honduran. She'd been working at the bar for three months, long enough for her skin to take on a deep tan. Not as brown as a local's, but the cruise-shippers couldn't discern the difference. They were relieved only that she understood what they wanted, and anticipated their needs. She didn't want to answer questions about where she was *really* from, about what she was doing hauling around trays of greasy food and giant, swirly souvenir cups full of Tropical Surprise and Roatan Blue.

The other people at the table, probably the woman's family, were fingers-deep into hamburgers and plates of fried plantains. All had sought refuge from the day's heat under the resort's palm-leaf *palapas*.

Jess weaved between the beachside tables to the bar.

"Donna, one more surprise," she called.

"You got it." Donna was working her way down a row of twenty or so *Salva Vidas*. With swift, practiced moves, she popped off the caps and tossed them into the bin.

Jess liked Donna. She was an out lesbian who didn't give a fuck what anybody thought about it. Her Spanish-speaking girlfriend came often to the bar with her two children from a previous marriage. Their pairing had shocked Jess at first, but only because Hondurans were, for the most part, conservative in their values. But everyone at the bar liked Donna, and no one seemed to care whom she slept with, as long as she kept up with the drink orders.

"Neda's table?" Jess asked.

Donna tossed the last cap into the bin. Next came the slices of lime, one for each bottle. "Yeah, bunch of drunk Spanish. She got her hands full. But this is the last ship this week, so we got to make the best."

Rainy season was coming, and that meant fewer cruise ships. Jess mostly lived off tips; Guy, the resort owner, only paid the servers two hundred *lempiras* for a day's wage, or the equivalent of ten U.S. dollars. Jess could earn triple, or even quadruple, on cruise ship days, but when the tenders didn't unload their steady streams of soon-to-be-

sunburned day-trippers, her day would be wasted refilling ketchup bottles and talking with Donna.

Donna threaded her fingers through the sweating necks of the bottles and placed them on circular trays.

"Tell Neda her drinks is up."

"Sure," Jess said, and went over to the cluster of tables and chairs facing the beach. On the way there, one of Neda's tables tried to flag her down. Jess ignored them. Neda moved on island time, and she wouldn't take too kindly to Jess co-opting her tables.

Neda was working her way around a large table, taking orders. She had long, slender braids with sea shells and beads anchoring the ends. A heavy-set woman, pretty, although she overcompensated for her advancing age by wearing too much makeup.

"Your beers are up," Jess said. "And table three wants something. Need a hand?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I need four more *Salvas* for table seven."

Jess got the beers from Donna and went back down to table seven.

"Here we are," she said, and set the tray down on the edge of the table. She was thinking about her own section. Twelve needed more napkins. Sixteen needed menus.

"I don't fucking believe it," a familiar, Italian-accented voice said.

All at once, the faces at the table came into focus. Jess felt a hand reach inside her chest, wrap its fingers around her heart, and squeeze.

Federica and Paolo sat with another couple she'd never met before.

"What is it?" the unfamiliar woman said.

"It's *her*," Federica said. She'd dyed her hair the color of a sun-dried tomato. Palo's head bobbed up. He had more lines around his eyes, but he was the same. "What are you doing here?"

"I work here," Jess said. She took the beers off the tray and set them on the table.

"What's going on?" the other woman said.

"That's the bitch that got my teaching status revoked," Federica said.

This was news to Jess, but not entirely a surprise. Federica had been the one to process Melissa Anderson's paperwork, not Paolo; she'd been the one to let a beginning diver go on an advanced dive. Jess had also heard that Federica had prior black marks on her record, including exceeding maximum instructor-student ratio.

"I'm sorry," Jess said. She struggled to keep her tone calm. "I didn't know." She didn't blame Federica for what happened. *I should have double-checked her paperwork myself*, Jess thought, for the thousandth time. *I should have asked her if she felt comfortable doing a deep dive.*

Federica stood up so fast the bottles on the table rattled and almost tipped over. "I didn't take her diving in a strong current. You did. You are the one who should have lost everything!"

"I did," Jess said. Federica took a step forward, but Paolo got up and put his arm around her shoulders. He said something in Italian, along the lines of *sit down, it was a long time ago, she's not worth it*. Federica shook him off.

"I *loved* my job, you stupid fucking *Americana*. And now I can't do it any more. Because of you. Did you think you could come back here and we wouldn't notice?

Huh?"

Federica picked up a bottle and threw it. Jess ducked. The bottle missed, but beer splashed her cheek and the front of her t-shirt.

Jess could feel her own anger rising up within her. The last time, five years ago, it was as if someone flipped a switch in her head. She hadn't wanted to hurt Federica then —no, she'd wanted to *kill* her. And she knew, didn't she, that she was capable of murder. She'd wanted Melissa Anderson to die that day. Yes, there it was, the truth she'd tried to erase with alcohol and drugs and sex. In that split second after Melissa's head had connected with her knee, she'd been awash with triumph. *I win. You lose.*

Jess couldn't breathe. Why was she so goddamn angry? She had only ever wanted to be part of their shop, to belong somewhere, and they'd rejected her.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. We can't have nobody throwing bottles around." Donna. Relief surged through Jess.

Donna came around to the table with one hand on her hip and a nonchalant, *I-will-gladly-kick-all-your-asses* expression on her face. Federica paused, distracted. Jess took advantage of the opportunity to flee.

"Yeah, run, bitch. Run. Run all the way home back to America," Federica taunted.

"It's time for you people to go," Donna said. "Don't worry about the check. Just go."

The group left, with Federica and Paolo still arguing in Italian. The other couple went a different direction —probably back to their hotel. Dive customers, or acquaintances.

Back in her section, Jess let herself get swept up in the comforting tide of work. The rest of her shift passed in a flurry of activity —sweaving between tables, bringing things, taking orders, wiping tables.

All at once, the tables were empty. Crumpled napkins and grease-stained baskets were all that remained of her customers. The last tenders to the cruise ship left at five, and only a handful of stragglers remained on the beach. Parents wrangled crying, sunburned children and packed their day's necessities into brightly-colored plastic totes.

Jess took a seat at the bar and counted her tips.

"Twenty-seven," Jess said.

Donna whistled. "Popular lady."

Neda sashayed up and threw her own stack of bills on the table. "Thirty. That table was a bunch of assholes, but at least they tipped good."

Donna took more bills out of the bar's tip jar and divvied up the spoils. A percentage went to Manuel, the busboy, and the kitchen staff.

"That comes to fifteen apiece," Donna said. She handed them each the smaller, redistributed piles of cash, with two one-hundred *lempira* bills on top, their day's wage. A good day.

Neda folded her money and shoved it in the back pocket of her shorts. "See you ladies later," she said. "I got a date."

"Oh? Where he taking you?" Donna asked.

"Dancing at Bobby's. Maybe I'll see you there, Jess?"

"Not tonight," Jess said. "I'm not in the mood."

"All right."

When she was gone, Donna popped the caps off two *Salvas* and handed one to Jess.

"On me," she said. "You want tell me what all that mess was about?"

"Not really," Jess said. The beer was cold and delicious. She hadn't been drinking lately. She'd been too busy overseeing final repairs on the house. The construction was taking a lot longer than they'd expected. Each big storm that swept in halted work for days on end. The roof was fixed and the planks repaired, but the added-on lower floor remained skeletal.

"*Eh! Jess! El jefe* want to speak with you," Manuel called from the door into the kitchen.

"Uh, oh," Donna said. "I'll pray for you."

Jess rolled her eyes and polished off her beer in several quick gulps. It was never a good thing to get called into the boss' office. It usually meant you were doing something wrong.

"Thanks, Dee," she said. "See you tomorrow."

#

Guy was waiting in the resort's front office. He was in his sixties, a retired CEO from Chicago who had come to Roatan to relax. He'd ended up buying the resort. She

saw him only rarely; he stopped into the bar for a drink from time to time, mostly to keep an eye on the bar's operations.

"Jess. Good, you're here," he said. "Close the door."

Jess didn't like the tone in his voice. She closed the door and sat in the chair opposite the desk, her hands twisted together in her lap.

He steepled his fingers over a stack of paperwork. "You're a good server, Jess, and I like having you here," he said.

Jess raised an eyebrow. "I feel a 'but' coming," she said.

"*But*," he agreed, "things are going to start slowing down here pretty quick. Neda has seniority, so we have to keep her on. I think it's best if you stop coming in at the end of the month. I'm sure you understand. It's rainy season."

Jess sighed. She'd known it was coming, but still, the news came as a shock. Coming to the bar each day had given her life structure, a structure she was going to miss. She'd made friends here; she'd woken up each day with a sense of purpose. Once again, she'd grown too comfortable. Every time she did, it got taken away. Why did she never learn?

Guy came around the desk and patted her on the back in a vaguely paternal gesture. Did he expect her to cry?

Jess extended her hand. "It's okay, Guy. I appreciated the job, you know?"

He shook it, clearly relieved by her lack of emotion. "Come back and see us sometime. We may have a place for you again when things pick up."

#



"That some bullshit right there," Donna said. She'd walked with Jess down to the water's edge. It was getting late; if Jess didn't leave soon, she'd be walking home in the dark.

In the shallows, she could make out bits of trash the tourists had left behind. Beer bottles, lost snorkels, bits of paper. All of it would wash up to shore and be raked away by the resort staff.

"Tell Neda I said good-bye," Jess said. Neda wouldn't care, but it was the polite thing to say.

Donna reached her arms around Jess and pulled her into a bear hug.

"Now you listen. I've worked at every place you can work on this island. A year ago, I was in West End, at that smoothie shop that closed. I worked up on the east side back in the day. Jobs come, and jobs go. You wait. Something will come."

Jess kissed Donna on the cheek. "You're amazing, you know that? Lupe is a lucky woman."

Donna laughed and gave her a playful shove. "Go on, you've got a long walk ahead."

*Captain Nero Hotel & Diving* was on the northern end of West end, on what Jess thought of as the end of the end, well off the tourist track. Here the coast was rocky, dead coral rising up from the water in stubby, wave-eaten cliffs. Few houses. The dirt

road ended at a gravel-strewn path. The shops survived only through the magic of the Internet (*just a five minute walk to the beach!*). Non-refundable packages, Jess was sure.

*This one would do nicely.*

She faced a large wooden sign painted with a cartoon captain. He had a pipe in his mouth like a Honduran Popeye; behind him, a yellow submarine bobbed on cartoon waves. It was as good a place as any.

*You have to dive, Mija. It's the only way.*

George could take care of himself, now. It was fortunate, because Jess didn't think she could have kept paying Lucia for much longer. Her nest egg was gone. In the two weeks since getting fired from the bar, she'd tried finding work all over town. She'd gone to the zip-lining park and to all the local tourist companies, but none of them had had any vacancies, especially not during rainy season.

*I can't, George. What if they recognize me?*

*Then you'll find another shop that doesn't. Memory only travels so far.*

Dive equipment lined the walls inside the whitewashed building. Dust-covered cases held the more expensive items —dive computers, electronic dive planners, gauges. A desk faced the door, its surface dominated by an old-school, boxy computer. PADI manuals in various languages were stacked around and on top of the computer manual, with several more piles scattered about the floor.

"Can I help you?" The man was standing in a doorway to the left, a cluster of fluorescent yellow dive lights dangling on lanyards from each hand. Through the narrow

doorway behind him, Jess caught sight of a wooden deck, and beyond that, a staircase leading down to a dock. A mid-sized dive boat was moored there, its tank racks empty.

"Where you headed tonight?"

"Fish Den. Maybe Lighthouse, if this wind picks up. You want on?"

He set the dive lights on top of a stack of dive manuals. Everything about the man said "dive instructor" —from his lean, muscular body to the elaborate whale shark tattoo that wound about his left forearm as if hunting invisible plankton.

"Yeah."

"You got your card?" She handed it to him.

"Instructor. I'm impressed. That your gear?"

He pointed to her bag.

"Yeah. I need ten pounds. I have everything else."

Her old gear had been in okay shape, when she'd finally gotten the courage to open the bag and take a look. The o-rings in her reg had gotten dried out and had needed to be replaced, but she'd found a place in French Harbor that did gear servicing and repair. She'd gotten her BCD serviced, too. All that remained was to test it in the water.

The man returned from the equipment room with two five-pound lead weights. She slipped them into the removable pockets of her BCD. The zippers were stiff and new; she'd bought them yesterday. Her old weight pockets had been lost five years earlier, somewhere in the depths beyond The Wall.

"I'm Chulo," he said, and Jess smiled at the reference. Chulo was Spanish for *cool*. He was originally from Barcelona, but came to Honduras over a year ago by way

of Mexico. Only a divemaster, but planning to head over to Utila for the next instructor course.

"Where'd you do your IDC?" he asked.

"Marine Blue."

"I hear that's a good shop."

As they spoke, Jess waited for the change. Did he know her? Had he heard the rumors? Federica had been bad-mouthing her all over town. Telling people she was a murderer.

Chulo didn't seem to notice her anxiety. He reached under the desk and brought out a clipboard with the usual waivers and forms.

"Just you?" he asked.

"Just me. How much?"

"I'll give you a special instructor rate. Thirty bucks."

"Done."

Jess went out on the back porch. Most dive shops only ran night dives once a week. Night diving was colder, and it required shops to stay open late. Most instructors preferred to lock the doors by five o' clock and head home for dinner and bed. But tonight was a new moon, and the sky would not pollute the darkness below. Rainy season storms were coming, but for now, the sea was as still and as shiny as an oil slick.

Other divers arrived, also seeking to capitalize on the ideal conditions. Three couples —two sets of young backpacker types and a set of middle-aged tourists. The older couple had new gear, expensive. Everyone else had rentals. Jess watched them

talk, the couples sticking in their insular pairs, their voices hushed as if they were all waiting for something more sacred than the setting of the sun. Chulo loaded up the tanks, one tank balanced on his shoulder while the other hung down at his side. Jess offered to help haul tanks, but he waved her away. *You're just a customer*, she reminded herself. *You don't work here.*

The sun slowly sank towards the horizon, a hazy orange ball too bright to look at. The water grew more opaque. She felt it calling her, the voice of the sea like a whisper in the deepest part of her brain. *Come see*, it said.

#

Jess drifted in water that was cool without being cold. At night, the sea was not black but a diverse spectrum of light and shade. The heads of coral were round, black shapes that stood out amid the lighter gray of the open water. Jess' dive light carved a bright tunnel along the reef. With each sweep of her arm, fish woke and spun in startled circles. The joy of diving again was almost overpowering. Why had she waited so long?

On one side of her was the wall of coral; on the other side, a darkness that squirmed with life. Phosphorescent organisms flared and faded with the grandeur of fourth of July fireworks.

Ahead, she could see the dim, yellow glow of the other customers' rental dive lights. In front, Chulo's bright LED led the pack. Jess lagged behind and below the others. Occasionally, Chulo checked in, circling his light in the okay signal, which she returned. He was technically her buddy, but he knew she was an instructor, and he let her

be. She liked pretending that she was alone, that the reef was hers. She remembered this dive site from her former life. The contours of the reef hadn't changed; only she had.

At night, the sea was alive with predators. Barracuda; cataract-eyed eels; lobster and crab that scuttled along the sandy bottom with alien grace. Jess had to be careful not to brush into the spiny sea urchins whose clusters of purple globules shone between their spines like cat's eyes.

There. An octopus, oozing over a rock. It slid down like melting butter, its skin changing color as it fled the beam of her LED. She thought to make a noise to summon the others, but changed her mind. They were too far away; by the time she got their attention, the octopus would be long gone. Even so, she craved a witness. *See?* she wanted to shout. The terrible beauty of it! How had she forgotten?

They dived on. Jess was colder now. They'd been under for forty-five minutes. Jess scanned the surface for the exit light. The captain would have tied it to a rope and tossed it over the side to mark the way. She couldn't see anything, but it wasn't her job to know the way.

Chulo led them to a large sand patch. He curled two fingers in front of his light—the sign for *kneel*. Jess knew this ritual, and found a spot about ten feet from the group. She emptied her BCD and lay down on her back with her tank in the sand. She turned off her light and let it dangle from the lanyard on her wrist. One by one, the other lights switched off.

As her eyes adjusted, shapes appeared. Shadowy reef loomed on all sides like ruins of ancient walls. Jess flicked her fingers outward; sparks exploded from her

fingertips. To her right, the others clapped and moved their arms, setting off more explosions of green phosphorescence. Jess heard the familiar sound of laughter muffled by regulators. *Do you see now?* she wanted to shout.

Above them hung strings of pearl, microscopic creatures whose mating dances filled the darkness with bioluminescence.

Jess stretched out her arms and dug her fingers in the sand. A pleasant vertigo overtook her, as if she might fall upwards into the atmosphere. She never wanted to leave.

But it was time to go. As if on cue, the other divers' lights switched on. The exit light beckoned. Chulo gave the thumbs up, and they ascended.

The first sting came as a surprise. The pain arced across the side of Jess' neck, electric, and she felt what it was before her brain could think of the word. *Jellyfish*. And she should have known, because it was a moonless night, and there always seemed to be more jellies during a new moon. Another sting got her in the knuckles, and she cursed into her regulator. They were little jellies, but they still hurt like hell. She was instantly grateful that she'd worn a long wetsuit and boots; most of her flesh was protected by a second skin of neoprene.

Chulo came into view below. She undulated all five fingers of her left hand. *Jellyfish*. He gave her the okay sign. He'd do what he could.

Jess took out her alternate reg and sprayed air upwards to flush the jellies away from the ascending divers. Chulo did the same for her. The bubbles tickled her exposed

skin. Back on deck, divers cursed and tried to shake loose the tentacles that clung to their skin. In the floodlights, silver threads gleamed on wetsuits like spider's webs.

The surface was a writhing carpet of jellyfish. They had fat, rectangular bodies that opened and closed in propulsive bursts. Stripes of iridescence made intricate patterns on their translucent flesh. Jess could never hate something so beautiful.

"*Hijos de puta,*" Chulo swore as he came up the ladder. He was wearing a rash guard, but his arms and legs were covered with stings. "*Vámanos,*" he shouted to the captain, and the boat's engine roared to life.

"Wait! Wait!" called one of the women. "My fin!" Her exposed arms and calves were thick and white, the flesh striped with pink welts. She was holding up a fin. Split, with spring-loaded back straps. Expensive.

Chulo cursed and spat over the side. "Where'd you lose it?"

"By the ladder," she said. "I was kicking to —to get them off me. It couldn't have gone far." Her tone said she expected someone to retrieve it for her, but she was well past the age of a convincing damsel in distress.

Jess pulled her wetsuit back up over her shoulders. "I'll get it."

"I can't let you do that," Chulo said. His voice was firm, but his eyes drifted to the cloud of jellies.

"You can buy me a beer later," Jess said.

Chulo didn't know her, but he'd seen her in the water, and that was enough. He raised his hands in defeat.

"Deal. You got air?"



Jess turned the valve on her tank. Air hissed back into her hoses. Over eight hundred PSI.

"Plenty," she said. She strapped on her gear and went back to the ladder. No air in her BCD; to avoid getting stung, she'd let herself sink like a stone.

She splashed in. The water felt colder than it had before. Her teeth chattered around the mouthpiece of her reg.

No stings this time; after a few feet, the jellies were gone. The reef was hers again.

She put a burst of air into her BCD before she hit the bottom, enough to regain her neutral buoyancy. Only twenty feet deep here, give or take, but plenty of places for a fin to hide. It was a silly thing, a fin. What did it matter if it got lost, if the woman had to buy new fins? Except it did matter. Jess had to find it, if only to prove to herself that she could.

She swam a makeshift expanding square, spiraling outwards from the base of the ladder. Blood worms dive-bombed her light; they cast strange, fluttering shadows on the coral heads. After five minutes, she saw a flash of light from above —Chulo telling her to give up, to come back to the boat.

She ignored him. She had to find it. Had to.

She had less than 400 PSI of air left when her beam caught on something yellow. Not the dull yellow of the coral but something bright, something artificial, as out of place down here as a freeway sign. *Got you, you bastard.*

The fin was wedged into a crevasse. She pulled, but it didn't break free. A finger of rock had hooked the spring on the heel strap. Stuck.

Jess was so focused the fin, she didn't see the eel until it was six inches from the end of her nose. A giant green moray who wasn't pleased at this human intrusion. Emerald skin; a face as weathered and scarred as an old soldier's; needle teeth. Harmless, under normal circumstances, but it didn't do to get too up close and personal with an eel. Everybody knew a guy who knew a guy who had lost a finger that way.

Jess started in surprise, and the eel flew straight at her face. Something clacked against her mask. Silky, serpentine flesh brushed her right cheek. Jess reached for the space on her regulator hose where she used to keep her dive knife. Her hand fell away empty.

She whirled her light around, half expecting another attack, but the eel was gone. *Probably scared him even more than he scared me*, she told herself, but it took at least a minute for her to regain control of her buoyancy and slow the frenetic beating of her heart. With her index finger, she traced the tiny scratch where the eel's teeth had connected with the glass of her mask.

She went back to the fin. Tilting it slightly forward then back did the trick. It slipped free, and Jess gave a shout of triumph. A silly thing, a fin. But as she ascended, she clutched it to her chest as if she had never held anything so precious.

"Thought I was going to have to go down there and get you," Chulo said as she climbed up the ladder.

"Sorry," Jess said. "It was stuck. Took me a couple of minutes to get it free."

She handed him the fin. The woman was already talking about how she had never seen so many jellyfish in her life, and how she couldn't wait to tell everyone back home what had happened.

In seconds, the boat was putt-putting toward the Christmas-tree lights of Half Moon Bay. Jess broke down her equipment and sat with her hands in her lap. The exhilaration of the dive faded, but there was a lingering pleasure, like the aftertaste of a rich dessert. She had dived again, and it had been like going home.

The woman who had lost the fin came over. She thanked Jess and pressed a wet ten-dollar bill into her hand.

Jess clutched it and tried not to itch the stings on her knuckles. In the wheelhouse, Chulo was talking to the captain. He glanced in her direction, then away again. It wouldn't be so bad, to have a beer with him. He was handsome, and he didn't know her from before. She'd convince him to drink their beers on the shop patio, away from the diver bars where she might be recognized. Maybe he'd be game to get some tacos; she was starving.

He came over, and she opened her mouth to speak. She stopped when she saw his face.

"Luis, the captain, he says . . ." Chulo paused. Jess' heart sank.

"He says you've been on Roatan before. He says —"

Jess lifted a hand to stop him, but he continued on.

"No, wait. Listen. You did me a big favor today. I can see you're a good instructor. But I can't let you come back to the shop again. You'll have to dive somewhere else. I'm sorry. *Comprendes?*"

"Yeah," Jess said. "*Comprendo.*" Hot tears threatened at the base of her eyes, but she blinked them away. It was dark; he probably hadn't seen.

Off the stern, the last of the jellies disappeared into the boat's wake. There was a final burst of iridescence, and then they were gone.

5

A big storm came and washed out the road. There was no electricity for two days, and the sea rose so high it threatened to reach even the steps of the apartment. Jess put on her rain poncho and waded through the sand yard —now a shin-deep lagoon—to the shop down the road. The road was awash with sea grass and seawater puddles, but the still-open restaurants hummed with gasoline generators and conversation. With the storm, the remaining tourists on the island had nowhere else to go.

The usually-dormant coast roared with new life. It reminded Jess of the handful of times she'd seen the Pacific, great brown waves that rose up and crashed down and threatened to destroy everything in their wake. There was something cleansing about a great storm, as if it could wash everything away, even the past.

She came back with matches, candles, and two jugs of water, one balanced on each shoulder. George was sitting on the porch. He had a squeeze ball in his right hand; a parting gift from Lucia. The strength on his right side was improving, but he still didn't

have as much grip as he'd like. He'd been right-handed before the stroke, and his once-beautiful script was illegible now. He could type, but he complained it was like a chicken pecking at the ground. She'd brought him his surviving notebooks, and after much urging on her part, he was finally typing them into a computer. He worked on it an hour or two every day at the net café. He got easily frustrated, but Jess thought working on his manuscript again was good for him. He'd put on weight, and there was only the slightest elision of consonants to indicate he'd once had a stroke.

"Looks like it's calming down," he said.

She nodded. "It'll be clear tomorrow. I thought I might try again. I could rent a moped and go up to some of the shops on the east side. They won't know me there."

George cradled his chin in one hand. "That's too far. You'd end up driving an hour every day just to go to work."

"I know, but we're going to run out of money if I don't find something soon."

"I could get a job."

"And what would you do? Who would hire you?" The words came out more snarky than she'd intended.

His face fell.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?"

George threw the squeeze ball. It splashed into a puddle. "You're right. I'm a useless old man. You should leave. Sell the house, and get your money back. Go somewhere else, where you don't have an old man dragging you down."

"I'm not leaving," she said, but another voice inside her whispered, *but you could*. It was true: they could sell the house. The economy was recovering. Some wealthy retiree would buy it. Cardona's land developer might still buy it and turn it into condos. Since coming back to the island, everyone had been telling her to leave: Cardona, then Federica and Paolo, now George. *How stupid and stubborn I am, to refuse to leave the one place no one wants me to stay.*

Her eyes traced the foamy edges of the Caribbean. She loved this place in a way she had never loved any other place. It wasn't a good place, or a bad place. There were problems here—violence and poverty and unhappiness. But those problems existed everywhere, no matter where in the world you went. Jess had been restless her entire life, first by force, and then by choice. It was enough. She would stay. To the bitter end.

The day after the storm, they went to the Tree House. All George's possessions and furniture were stored under tarps outside. The workmen had moved the pile up the slope a ways before the storm. The exterior looked like a Jenga puzzle, with fresh, unpainted boards intermixed with surviving pink planks. They went into the lower level first. The freshly-poured foundation had remained dry throughout the storm—a good sign. The walls had drywall and electric sockets already installed. A tiny bathroom was hidden behind a partition. The emptiness of the walls and floor reminded Jess too much of Roatan Jail. She thought of the dark smudge around those walls, the circular smear of waiting backs. *Padre nuestro, que estás en los cielos . . .*

"We need to buy some paint," Jess said. "I'll go into town tomorrow."

"I can help," George said. He lifted each arm in an up and down motion reminiscent of the *Karate Kid*. "Up . . . down. Up . . . down."

Jess' mouth curled upwards in a smile. The exercise would be good for him.

"Okay, Daniel-san, you can help."

"*Hai, Sensei!*"

George made it up the stairs to the second level. He was out of breath when he reached the top, but he made it.

"I think. We should go with green. This time," he said, panting. One hand caressed the faded pink boards. "It's a symbol . . . of renewal and rebirth. But —not a gloomy green. Something bright. Teal, maybe."

The interior smelled wonderfully of sawdust and newness. The rooms were empty, but the waterlogged boards had been replaced with fresh hardwood, and the roof was an unbroken plane. It might have been a new house, and perhaps it was, for all the money that she'd poured into it.

"I think we should call it Tree House Divers," George said.

He was like a dog with a bone. For weeks, he'd pestered her with the idea of opening a shop.

"George, we'd have to build a dock. We'd need rinse tanks, not to mention equipment! And where would we get a compressor? We don't even have a boat!"

"I could be the shop manager," George continued, undeterred. "We could make a logo in the image of a tree floating over water."

"For once in your life, *listen to me*. We don't have the money. *I* don't have the money. A more practical idea is to rent the lower floor out. We could pull in five hundred a month, or more, for that downstairs apartment. I could find a job at a dive shop on the east side. It could work."

"No, it won't," George said. His voice had grown quiet in a way that was unsettling. "Federica and Paolo have too many friends. Even on the east side."

"How do you know?"

"I've been taking my walks, talking to people. You're a celebrity now, but not in a good way. The only solution is to open your own shop. You could get a website, and do it proper. The customers won't know, or care, about some incident years ago. *Mija* —"

"You're full of shit."

"Now it's your turn to listen," he said. His voice was strong and confident. This was the voice of the Old George. There was a sternness to his tone that reminded her of her father.

"Do you trust me?" His arm wrapped around her shoulders. "*Mija*," he said again, softer now. "Do you. Trust me?"

"Yeah," she said. "Sort of."

"Good enough. Because I have a plan. We're going to French Harbor."

"Right now?"

"You have somewhere you need to be?"

Jess sighed. "You know the answer to that. Why French Harbor?"



"Now, now," he chided. "That part's a surprise."

#

They took a taxi directly to the harbor. Only one or two boats were moored, yachts covered with canvas tarps waiting out the better weather. In the shallows, a sunken fishing trawler lay on its side, with giant holes in the hull where rust and saltwater had eaten through.

French Harbor was the only major town after Coxen Hole. It was the center of industrial life on the island. Most of the buildings were warehouses selling construction materials and auto parts shops. There was even an American-style strip mall, replete with an electronics store and a medium-sized supermarket. The harbor was a stopping-place for many of the yacht owners and fishing vessels that wanted to bypass the more touristy west. From the town center, the road wound up and over the island, along a rocky coastline dotted with fishing villages and the occasional all-inclusive resort. The eastern coast was less forgiving than the west —there weren't as many beaches, and it was more prone to rough currents and waves.

George held onto her arm as they went down the rickety steps to the docks. They walked past several empty rows and an overturned rowboat. At the end of the dock was a boat, not much larger than a rowboat. It was covered with a tarp.

"What are we doing here?" Jess said.

"Take the cover off," George said.

"Won't the owner mind?" It was a stupid question; the docks were deserted.

"Ask me if I mind."

Jess stared at him. "You own a boat?"

"Go on, ask me."

Jess suppressed the urge to throttle him. "Fine. Do you mind?"

"Nope." His grin was impish.

It took her a minute to work loose the knots of rope. She pulled the tarp away. Fiberglass hull, outboard motor. Big enough for six passengers and a captain. The hull needed some paint, but it looked reasonably seaworthy.

"Are we taking it for a spin?"

"We won't get far. The last time I gave her any gas was about five years ago."

"I didn't know you had a boat."

"Nobody else did, either, which is why nobody thought to steal this when they carted me off like a sack of potatoes. I want you to have it."

Jess ran a hand through her hair. With a boat, they could actually do it. Open a shop. She could teach again. She'd been afraid to hope, before. But now . . .

"Wow....I mean. Wow. We have a boat," she said.

"We have a boat," George agreed.

"Now we just need everything else."

"I have an idea about that, too. I've found," he drawled, "an investor."

"Who?" she asked, but somehow, inexplicably, she already knew.

*El Doctor.*

#

"What kind of game do you think you're playing?"

Mateo sat at one of the sea-facing tables at Lupita's, a half-drunk cup of coffee in front of him and a half-smoked cigarette burning between two fingers.

"Please, join me," he said.

"Why are you giving George grand ideas about opening a shop? You can't be serious about investing. You don't know anything about diving."

Mateo pressed a hand to his chest. "You insult me. But it's true. I know nothing of diving." He set his cigarette down on the edge of a clamshell ashtray. "I was hoping you would teach me."

Jess balanced her thumbs on her hips. "I thought you had a girlfriend," she said.

Mateo snorted. "I don't need any instruction in that department," he said.

"*Siéntete*. You're making me nervous."

Jess pulled a chair away from the table and sat. "So, let me get this straight. You want to invest in my dive shop."

"Correct."

"And what do you want in return?"

"Co-ownership. A 50-50 split of any and all profits. Also, I want to be a divemaster."

Jess gave a surprised laugh. "What? Do you even have your Open Water?"

"No."

"Have you ever been diving?"

Mateo gave a sheepish grin. "No."

"Can you even swim?"

Mateo picked up his cigarette and took a drag. "That, I can do."

"I don't get it."

His smiled fell. "I told you I retired . . . from what I was doing before. I have money now, but it won't last forever. Honduran girlfriends are expensive, you know."

"I imagine they are," Jess said.

"*Entonces*. I heard you wanted to open a shop, but you needed some capital to get your equipment. The tourism here is starting to recover after the *mierda* on the mainland with Zelaya, and I think business is going to be good soon. I see it as an investment in my future."

"Okay, but why a divemaster?"

"Why not? You *gringos* are always talking about diving. How deep, how long, all the little creatures you find. I've always liked the sea, but I was . . . busy, before."

"And you're done with that now? Are you sure?"

"Yes." He stubbed out his cigarette in the clamshell. "When can I start?"

"How soon can you get me some money to buy equipment?"

"How soon do you need it?"

## 6

The men were building a road. They spread the asphalt with long poles that looked like flat shovels. Many of them shirtless, others with their shirts sweat-stuck to their backs. The heat emanating from the asphalt gave the air a mirage-like waver. The men wore hats woven out of palm fronds to keep off the sun. They had handkerchiefs

wrapped around their noses and mouths in a futile attempt to combat the stench and the dust. A hulking yellow machine crept forward inch by inch, spewing black stuff onto the ground for the men to scrape flat.

The men paused in their work when she walked up. It was hard, grueling work, building a road, but it was one of the better-paying jobs on the island.

One of the men pulled the handkerchief down from his face. "You can't be here," he said in polite Spanish. His tone implied: *Did you get lost on your way back to the cruise ship?*

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work," she said. "I'm looking for Nacho."

The man turned, stuck two fingers in his mouth, and emitted a high-pitched whistle. "Eh! Nacho! Come here!"

A man stepped forward. "Si, jefe." He was shorter than the other men, but with arms ridged with muscles from hard labor. He pulled down the handkerchief covering his face. He was a older, his skin weathered by five years of hard work in the sun.

"This woman wants to speak with you. Be quick." The boss left. Nacho took off his sun hat and stepped forward.

"*Señorita?* How can I —"

"Hello, Nacho," Jess said in English. "Do you remember me?"

Nacho's eyes widened. "*La Californiana!* It's you! You come back."

"Si," Jess said, switching back to Spanish. "It's good to see you, my friend. I'm happy you remember me."

Nacho's mouth dropped open. "You speak Spanish! You've learned very fast!"

Jess laughed. "I knew it before. But it was a secret."

Nacho gave a bemused shake of the head. "You have many secrets! But why have you come here?"

Jess started to answer, but she was interrupted by a whistle from the work area.

Nacho glanced back in the direction of *el jefe*. "I must go."

"Will you be free later, to talk?"

Nacho put his hat back on and nodded. "We'll have a rest in one hour. I'll meet you at the beach." He waved a hand in the direction of the sea.

"One hour," Jess agreed.

It was a relief to find herself away from the acrid stench of tar and the heat of the roadwork machines. She sat in the sand by the sea's edge. She watched the dive boats and water taxis that passed by, and lost herself in thoughts of the shop, and all the work that needed to be done. George had volunteered to be office manager, when they had the place up and running. As soon as they had everything she needed, she'd make a web page and some signs to get people to the shop. She was so lost in thought, she was startled when Nacho sat down next to her in the sand.

They sat together for a few minutes without speaking. Nacho's eyes traced the sea, and she could see the longing there—it was written in the creases around his eyes, in the way he squinted into the sun as if trying to see past the horizon.

She reached into her bag and handed him the gift she'd bought him that morning. A shiny red apple, the freshest one she could find at the *frutería*.

Nacho gave a wry chuckle, wiped the apple on his arm, and took a bite. When he'd swallowed, he asked, "why are you here, *Californiana*?"

"Do you still miss it?" she asked.

Nacho followed her gaze out to the water. "Yes. But this is honest work. Good work."

"Come work for me. I need a boat captain. I'm opening a shop. For diving."

"Do you have a boat?"

"*Sí*. It's not big, but it's a boat."

Nacho took another bite of the apple. "How much will you pay me to be your *capitán*?"

Jess shrugged. "Five dollars a day, at first. You'll get more when we have more customers. They'll give you tips. In the beginning —I can't lie. In the beginning, there won't be much money."

Nacho finished the apple and buried the core in the sand. "I must think," he said, at last. "I must speak with my wife." He stood and brushed the sand from his pants.

Jess watched him leave. He would come around, she knew it. She felt a twisting anxiety in her gut. He would be taking a big risk, coming with her. If the dive shop went belly up, he'd be unemployed, with children and a wife to support. She was asking too much of him, but she also knew that if things went well, Nacho would make far more money than he would working the road. He'd be out on the water again, where he belonged. At heart, Nacho was like her. He understood the call of the sea.

#

She and George found the bulk of their equipment two days later. They were taking their habitual sunset walk, from one end of The End to the other, and they came across an old black man sitting on an upended bucket. Behind him, a shed they'd never really noticed before stood open, with stacks of dive gear resting in haphazard piles on the dirt floor.

On the outside of the shed, she now noticed, was a washed-out blue parrot, and the words "Blue Parrot Divers." Some of the letters had been covered with flyers or posters for island events. Jess and George paused at the sight of all that expensive equipment lying on the ground, where dust and other debris could clog up the internal mechanisms.

The old man had a weary cast to his shoulders, and he was eager to talk. His name was Donny, and he'd been the owner of Blue Parrot for eight years.

"Just couldn't do it no more," he said. "Can't run no dive shop with no customers," he said. "I tried my best."

The problems had started with the Zelaya crisis, but they hadn't ended there. During the last big storm, the shop's boat had sunk and needed massive repairs. He'd had a divemaster running the shop for a while, a German by the name of Elias, but the man had quit when it became clear that the boat was out of commission. Not having a boat was the kiss of death for an island dive shop. Donny had tried to sell the shop, but he hadn't had any bites so far. Times were bad, he said, real bad.

"What are you going to do with all the equipment?" Jess asked.



"Sell it. I don't know who'll buy it. It's all used. Might have to take it to the mainland to sell. I don't know."

Jess picked up one of the BCDs. It was dirty, but not too worn. There was no way to know if the inner bladders were intact until she could test them in a tub of water.

"Mind if I take a look inside?" she said.

"Go ahead."

Dust motes danced in the humid air inside the shed. Everything stank of old neoprene. In the back, a row of ten or so tanks lay on their side like logs at a lumber mill. It was going to be expensive, getting them all tested and serviced and cleaned, but it would be less expensive than buying new tanks, far less.

George walked up to a tangled pile of regulators. He worked one loose and examined the mouthpiece and gauges. "I can fix these," he said. "A little silicone grease, new o-rings, and good as new. We could pick up some service kits."

Jess put her hands on her hips. "The BCDs look okay, but we'd have to take the tanks to the mainland. It's a lot of work."

"Good exercise," George said. He flexed a bicep. He really was stronger now, and she had to remind herself daily to stop treating him like an invalid.

They went back outside. Donny was still sitting on the upended bucket, watching the people pass by on the road.

"You want to buy something?" he said. "I'll price it fair."

"How much?" Jess said.

Donny's salt-and-pepper brows furrowed. "For which one?"

"For all of it," Jess said.

The old man almost fell off the bucket, but he smiled in a way that made him look twenty years younger.

"Come to my house, and we'll talk," he said.

7

Whale Shark Divers was sandwiched between two larger and more popular dive shops on the main drag. Nobody was around in the front of the shop, so she went to the back to the equipment room. Hank, the owner, was bent over a disassembled regulator. He was tall and large, but his extra pounds were more muscle than fat. He was wearing a cutoff Harley Davidson t-shirt, and his arms were sleeved with a rainbow of tattoos. Above his workbench, a moth-eaten American flag had been nailed into the wall.

"No dives today," he said when she came in. "Motor's busted on the boat. Come back Wednesday."

"I'm not here to dive. I'm here about your compressor."

Hank tossed his screwdriver down on the table and turned to look her over. Closer now, Jess could make out some of the tattoos on his arms—not scuba-related, as she'd expected, but military. A knife piercing a heart dominated his left forearm, with the words "Semper Fi" emblazoned in black letters on the hilt.

"Well, what can I do you for?"

"I hear you do tank fills. I'm opening a shop, and I'm looking for a place to fill my tanks on a regular basis until I can get a compressor from the mainland. There's a place in La Ceiba —"

"Those fuckers take forever," Hank interrupted. "I know. Took six months to get mine, and she breaks every chance she gets as it is. You're up in that big pink house in Sandy Bay?"

"We painted it green."

"You gave it a funny name, right? Tree top?"

"Tree house."

"Right." He wiped his hands on an old rag. "We might be able to work something out. Come on, let's go grab a beer. It's early, but I'm not diving today."

At the sports bar across the road, soccer players ran back and forth across fields on two big-screen TVs. Two men sat at the bar, their eyes glued to the screens. All the tables were empty.

Hank took a table facing the road and waved at the bartender, a woman in jeans so tight they looked painted on. She brought over two *Port Royals* without asking.

"Thanks, honey," Hank said. He winked at her, and she rolled her eyes and sauntered away.

It wasn't a cruise ship day, so the roads were quiet. Dive staff lounged in their shops, hoping for customers despite the thunder clouds that were making their way over from the mainland.

Jess fidgeted. At a few of the places she'd tried before Hank's, the owners had been openly hostile —friends of Federica and Paolo. She was getting desperate.

"You know you're crazy, opening a shop during rainy season," Hank began.

Jess shrugged. "By the time we get everything we need, and get all set up, rainy season will almost be over."

"You got a boat?"

"Yeah. Little single motor, nothing special."

"Does she have a name?"

"The *Jailbreak*."

"Huh. You and the funny names. Where'd that one come from?"

George had thought of the name, and Nacho had approved. They'd painted the words on the side in bright blue, next to the bright green of Tree House Divers. She thought of Roatan jail, and of Hospital Santa Ángela de la Cruz.

"Inside joke," Jess said, peeling a strip of label from her bottle.

"Maybe you'll tell me about it someday. In the meantime, how's three bucks per tank sound? You drop 'em off, we'll fill 'em."

"That's fair," Jess said. She peeled the rest of the label from her bottle, and rolled it into a ball between her fingers. She knew she was going to have to tell him the truth, but she wasn't ready to burst the bubble of camaraderie between them. She pointed to the tattoo on his forearm. "*Semper Fidelis*. Always loyal. Marine?"

"Yeah. Had this one done in 'Nam. Got it retouched a few years ago."

"How long were you over there?"

"Did two tours. Was only seventeen when I enlisted. Had to get my mom to sign for me. Ended up career military, if you can believe it. Retired a couple of years ago, saw this place for sale, and decided to while away my golden years in island paradise. Plus, my wife said she'd divorce me if I didn't take her somewhere nice for a change."

"My father served in the Gulf and Iraq," Jess said.

"Let me guess. You're an Air Force brat."

Jess lifted her hands in the air as if she were under arrest. "Guilty as charged. Don't shoot."

"Another beer?"

"Sure," Jess said. "I'll get this round, but make mine a *Salva*."

Hank whistled at the bartender, who glanced up with a world-weary expression from the pile of glasses she was drying with a towel.

"*Port Royal* and a *Salva*," he called.

Jess cleared her throat. "Hank, there's something you need to know about me, before we make the deal official. I used to work here, on the island, five years ago —"

Hank raised a hand. His face was grim. "I know all about that. Your friend Federica came by the other day."

So he knew. Inwardly, Jess groaned. Federica's grudge had shown no signs of going away. In addition to starting all the rumors, George had said he'd even seen Federica snooping around the shop one of the afternoons when Jess was out buying equipment. They were going to have to do something about her, or the situation would escalate. It could hurt their business, before it even opened.

"She's really making the rounds."

Hank snorted. "Listen. What's done is done. I don't put much stock in the past. Believe me, half the people on this island are here escaping something."

He leaned forward onto his forearms. His expression was serious. She could see it then—the war, the things you never get over, no matter how long you live. Her father had had that look, at times, although he usually drowned it in beer or scotch.

"I don't care what you did five years ago. I don't ask about body counts. I won't ask for yours if you don't ask for mine. Deal?"

Jess could see he meant it. She reached out a hand, and he shook it. "Deal," she said.

Later, Jess walked back down West End, equal parts bewildered and relieved. *We might actually pull this off*, she thought. There was much to be done: they'd have to construct rinse tanks, and they still needed more wetsuits in varying sizes. All thoughts of Federica, and the problem she represented, dissipated from her mind. She flagged down a bus headed up to Coxen Hole; there was a dive equipment shop in French Harbor she wanted to check out. On the bus, she took out a scrap of paper and began making a list of things they still needed to buy. It wasn't until one of the other passengers turned to stare at her that she realized she was humming.

8

Mateo broke the surface and ripped the mask from his face. He almost fell backwards, but Jess reached out a hand and grabbed his BCD strap to stabilize him.

"I feel like I can't breathe," he said.

"It would be easier to breathe if you kept your regulator in your mouth," Jess said dryly.

She had to suppress a smile. Mateo, with all his masculine swagger, was proving to be one of her more difficult dive students. He had a long way to go, if he wanted to become a divemaster.

They stood in four feet of water, on patch of sand inside Half Moon Bay. Nearby, a group of children laughed and splashed each other. Further out, a few snorkelers drifted over the carpet of sea grass.

"Let's try it again. This time, forget about all the equipment you're wearing. Just look at me, and concentrate on breathing. You can do it."

Mateo nodded and put his regulator in his mouth.

"Forgetting something?" She handed him the mask he'd dropped in the water.

"*Idiota*," he chastised himself, then slipped the mask over his nose and eyes.

Jess gave the thumbs down and held up her deflator hose as if making a real descent. Mateo mimicked her posture, and they knelt down on the sand. Mateo's knees bobbed; Jess pulled down on his BCD to keep him upright. If necessary, she'd stick a couple of spare weights in his pockets to anchor him to the sand.

The sand kicked up by their fins floated in a cloud around them. Mateo was breathing too fast; bubbles hid his face from view. She was going to lose him soon if she didn't do something.

She tapped his mask with two fingers. *Look at me*, she signed. *Breathe*. She moved her hand away from her mouth, and then back in. *In....Out. In...Out.*

Mateo's breathing slowed down. He stopped fluttering his fins, and the sand began to clear. Some shallow-water fish, so white they were almost translucent, darted around them, feeding off whatever lived in the sand. She pointed to them, and she could see Mateo relax and start to become aware of his surroundings.

*Okay?* she asked. Thumb and forefinger, bent into a circle.

*Okay*, he replied.

She made the sign for the regulator recovery exercise. It was one of the first skills every diver learned: how to safely retrieve your regulator —without holding your breath —if it accidentally came out of your mouth underwater.

*You watch me*, she instructed. She took a deep breath in and removed the regulator from her mouth. It fell to her side.

*Remember*. One finger tapping the side of her forehead. *Bubbles*. She pointed to the steady stream of bubbles from her lips. *Watch me*.

She leaned to the right and swept her hand along the side of her body, all the way to her tank. The regulator hose was now resting against her bicep.

*Remember*. She put the regulator in her mouth and blew hard enough to clear the water from the exhaust valves. Then she did the same thing again, this time using the purge valve on the front of the regulator to clear the water.

*Your turn*.



Mateo took a breath and threw his reg to the side. His movements were too fast, but he remembered to blow bubbles, and he cleared the reg of water without difficulty. She gave him a high five. Even under water, she could hear him laugh.

Things got better when they moved to the deeper sand patch, a few feet away. Mateo's initial fear was gone, and he waited patiently for her to complete her demonstrations before doing the skills himself. He made a few mistakes here and there, but after Jess corrected him, he was able to do the skill correctly on the second try.

Surfacing after the training was like waking from a dream. They blinked in the sunlight, and swam on their backs until they got shallow enough to take off their fins and walk in. The equipment was heavier now, their bodies unaccustomed to gravity.

Jess was reeling in the surface marker buoy when Marisol strolled over to from the road. She was wearing a transparent sundress over a pale blue bikini.

"Are you finished now?" she said in Spanish. "You were out there a long time."

To Jess, it felt like only minutes had passed, but her dive computer told her they'd been under for three quarters of an hour.

"I don't know," Mateo said. "Teacher, am I done for today?"

"Yep. Come back tomorrow at eight. We'll go for your first dive."

They walked out to the dock where they'd tied up *Jailbreak*. Jess helped Mateo take off his gear. They set it down in the bottom of the boat.

"I can come with you. Help clean up."

"It's fine. Nacho and George will help me. Tomorrow, I'll make you assemble and disassemble your gear about five more times, so missing one isn't going to hurt you."

Mateo laughed. "I suppose I'll have to get used to taking orders from a woman."

Jess glanced behind him. Marisol had one hand on her hip. The other hand shielded her eyes from the sun. "I'm not so sure about *that*," she said. "Go on. See you tomorrow."

Mateo jogged back down the beach. She waved to Nacho, who had been chatting with the *taxistas* under the shade of a palm tree.

"*Vamos*," she said. In one fluid move, Nacho yanked the pull cord on the motor. Jess untied the boat and jumped in, careful not to step on the BCDs.

"¿*Cómo es?*" Nacho asked.

"*Bueno*, he's a good student. Do you want to learn? I'll teach you."

Nacho shook his head. "Ay, no! I am a *capitán*. I catch the fish, I eat the fish, but I don't swim with the fish!"

Jess chuckled. Half Moon Bay receded behind them as they went out past the reef, then north along the coast to Sandy Bay. The Tree House didn't have a dock yet, and it took both her and Nacho working together to beach the boat and dig the anchor into the rock-strewn sand. It took two loads to get all the equipment up to the base of the Tree House. They'd made some rinse tubs out of repurposed gasoline barrels, and George had already filled them with water.

"How'd our first student do?" George asked from the bottom of the steps.

"Won't know for sure until we get him in open water, but my gut says he'll do fine."

George came over and began breaking down Mateo's gear.

"I can do that," Jess said.

"I got it." George worked slowly, since his left hand had to compensate for the lingering weakness in his right. *Won't be long until he's diving again*, Jess thought. She reached over with one arm and gave him a hug around his shoulders. It was an awkward gesture, and George looked up, startled. Jess rarely showed affection for anyone, and she'd never hugged George before.

"It's really starting to come together," George said, and patted the side of her cheek with the back of one hand.

Jess helped clean up the rest of the gear and went into the shop. It wasn't a shop yet, not really: all the equipment they'd collected was gathered in piles. Tanks were stacked in the corner, and regulators lay tangled together on a folding table, waiting for servicing. They'd ordered an outdoor storage shed where they could hang equipment to dry, and Nacho said he had a cousin who could donate a work table.

George poked his head through the front door. "Hey, the guys in Ceiba say the compressor will be ready next week. Tuesday."

"I think we'll need all hands on deck for that. Check with Nacho."

"Aye, aye."

She gave a satisfied glance around the room, and got to work.

#

The next morning, Jess took Mateo out to Sea Quest Shallow, a good beginner's dive site with a long channel of sand bordered by a twenty-foot wall of reef. They practiced basic skills on a sand patch, then she led him over the coral and down again. Here, Sea Quest Shallow and Sea Quest Deep were divided by a hundred yards or so of sand. They'd stick to the shallower water for this dive, but Jess didn't mind. Above forty feet, the colors were richer, and there were more of the tiny organisms and reef fish that thrived in proximity to sunlight. She led Mateo along the coral. Her eyes scanned the reef for pretty things; she was eager to show him her world.

Mateo was good in the water, and he seemed to grasp the basic principles of buoyancy. Too much air in the BCD could mean bobbing up to the surface like a cork; not enough, and some students exhausted themselves finning upwards in an effort to stay at the right depth. Mateo started to overinflate once, but she gestured for him to release air from his BCD and he obeyed. There was a science to buoyancy that was second nature to experienced divers. As you descended, the air in your jacket compressed, and more needed to be added. The opposite was true for the ascent. The air in the jacket expanded, and could cause a rapid, uncontrolled ascent.

For people like Jess, maintaining perfect buoyancy became instinctive, a matter of minute adjustments. Jess could *feel* when she was at neutral buoyancy: her whole body was weightless, part of the water around her. The slightest inhale could lift her up, and a steady exhale could drop her down. The adjustments were like a dance, and for a new diver like Mateo, it was easy to overthink rather than listen to one's body.

She'd been worried Mateo would panic again, as he had in confined water, but he was too absorbed by the novelty of the reef to be anxious. Everywhere they looked was life and color. Even the water moved with its own urgency. She watched with pleasure as he took it all in, and through him, she felt anew the rush of the first dive. She had forgotten how much she loved teaching, and how much it had been an integral part of herself in her early days on the island.

They came across a sting ray half-buried in the sand. When they got too close, it fluttered its triangular fins like a bird taking flight. It soared away. Each time they saw a new fish, Jess showed Mateo the signs. A flat palm with a pointing finger underneath: *sting ray*. Opening and closing the hand like pincers: *crab*. The list went on.

At one point, another group of divers passed them going the other direction. At the head of the pack of three student divers was Hank, wearing only a rash guard and some board shorts. A neon yellow handkerchief kept his hair out of his eyes. He paused when he saw her. In a few fast signals, he told her there were three turtles beyond the next rise. Jess thanked him —her palms pressed together as if in prayer —and he gave a mock bow and moved along.

Mateo, unable to follow the signs, opened his hands in a *what gives?* gesture.

*Follow me.*

As promised, the turtles were there, two adults and a baby the size of a beach ball. The turtles were ripping the flesh from a barrel sponge with their beaks.

Mateo made an *unnnnh!* sound, the underwater equivalent of *wow!*

Jess checked her computer. It was time to go. They made their way back to the sand patch. Jess sent up the safety sausage to alert Nacho to their location. They did their five-minute safety-stop facing each other, looking down on a reef that now took on an indistinct, patchwork quality, like farmland viewed from the window of a plane.

Jess curled her fins up and hovered Buddah-style. She smiled to watch Mateo try and imitate her posture. He grabbed at his knees, but tilted to one side until he was almost upside-down. He released his knees and flailed around a bit until he got himself upright again. The hum of a motor signaled Nacho's arrival—from above, Jess could see the underside of their tiny boat, waiting a short distance away. Nacho would be watching for their bubbles, waiting for them to break the surface before coming in any closer.

Jess' watch beeped the end of the safety stop. She gave the thumbs up, and motioned for Mateo to get into the correct ascent posture. *Deflator hose up. Eyes up. Watch for boats.* He did as instructed.

Their faces broke the surface. Mateo remembered to inflate his jacket on his own. She could see it—Mateo, as a divemaster, taking customers out to the reef. It would take many dives, but the potential was there. He wasn't afraid, and he was willing to learn.

He spit out his reg. "*Incredible*," he said. "All this time . . . I never knew."

The boat pulled closer, and Jess showed him how to hand up his gear without drifting away from the boat.

"¿*Cómo fue?*" Nacho asked.

"Beautiful," Jess said.

Mateo didn't answer. He was looking down at the water with an expression of longing. From the surface, the reef took on the blurred hues of an impressionist painting.

He looked like a diver.

9

Jess poked her head through the door of the shop. Mateo and George were sitting at the work bench at the back of the room. George was showing Mateo how to adjust a regulator diaphragm for air flow.

"Glad you made it," Jess said to Mateo. She tried to keep the irritation from her voice, but only partly succeeded. "We're leaving at one for the ferry," Jess said. "You guys going to be ready?"

Mateo looked at his watch. "Shit. I lost track of time. Marisol went down to the *baleada* shack to get us some lunch. I told her I'd pick her up."

"The one by Hank's place? We're headed down there to pick up the last load of tanks. I'll get her."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's no problem. You boys have fun."

Jess let the door swing shut and went out to the yard. Nacho was waiting in the pickup with the engine running. The pickup was on loan from one of Nacho's cousins. Once they got the compressor, they wouldn't need to keep hauling tanks between Sandy Bay and West End every time they went for a dive. The construction of the dock was

almost complete. The yard smelled pleasantly of sawdust, and a stack of boards waited by the water for the contractor to return from lunch.

"¿*Vienen?*?" Nacho asked, with an impatient tone. He took off the Red Sox cap he was wearing and wiped sweat from his brow.

"No, they're staying here. Let's go."

They rolled out onto the main road. The breeze helped mitigate the heat, but only a little. Tensions had been high at the shop for the past few days. Nacho didn't approve of Mateo's former occupation, and he wasn't thrilled to have to take orders from him. For over two months, the shop had brought in little to no money. They'd had a few customers, here and there —stragglers who wandered up from the beach or web bookings —but they'd spent most of the time sitting around, playing cards, and watching the door.

The waiting was getting to all of them. Mateo barked orders at Nacho, who complained, not wrongly, that he was doing all the work for none of the pay. Jess was relieved Mateo had showed up to help with the compressor. Most days, he flitted off with Marisol, sometimes for days at a time. His inconsistency had made it impossible to continue his dive training. He'd finished the Open Water and Advanced, but stalled when it came to starting Rescue. Each time Jess scheduled a training dive, he found some excuse not to come, usually something to do with Marisol. Jess, frustrated, stopped asking. She could find another divemaster, and he would continue to be co-owner of the shop. She assumed that if he wanted to continue, he'd seek her out, and she let the matter



drop. If they didn't get more customers soon, however, the shop would fall apart before it started. Everything depended on what high season would bring to their door.

Nacho drove fast down the winding stretch of road to West End. Jess was too tired to try to make conversation. The air conditioner was broken, so they rolled down both windows. A hot breeze rolled over them. They'd need to hurry if they were going to make it to the ferry on time.

Hank was out diving when she got to his shop, but he'd stacked the freshly-filled tanks under the awning for her. They were still warm to the touch. She grabbed a tank in each hand and brought them over to Nacho, who slid them onto the bed of the pickup. There were only twelve tanks, plenty for a shop as small as theirs.

Jess handed the last two tanks up to Nacho and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "I've got to find Marisol. I'll be back in five minutes."

Nacho retreated to the shade to wait.

Jess trotted over to the *baleada* shack, but the plastic picnic table and chairs in front of the entrance were empty.

"*Muy buenas*. Have you seen Marisol?" Jess asked the owner.

The woman looked up from her enormous pot of cooking beans. "No, I haven't seen her today. *¿Algo de comer?*"

"Not today, *gracias*," Jess said. She went back out to the road and lifted five fingers to Nacho. *Five more minutes*. He nodded.

She walked a ways up the road. High season had begun, and minibuses lined the main road, honking and bumping their way past West End's dive shops and restaurants. Tourists in sun visors and shorts ogled at Jess through the tinted windows of their air-conditioned buses. Street vendors multiplied on cruise ship days. Jess passed vendors set up on card tables along the road. The tables held conch shells, jewelry carved from coconut shells, made-in-China friendship bracelets, and t-shirts stamped with dive logos. She didn't see Marisol amid the throng of beach-combers and divers, but she thought she might have gone to Sunrise bar, if she was bored and looking to socialize with diver types. It had been five years since Jess' altercation with Federica, and Sunrise Bar had probably changed hands several times since then. She doubted anyone would enforce her old ban, but she couldn't suppress a slight nervousness walking up onto the beachfront deck, as if at any moment a voice might say: *You again? Get out!*

She caught a glimpse of brunette hair by the beach, and took a step forward, then stopped. Marisol was talking to Federica at one of the beachfront tables. They were laughing like old friends.

*Great. Just...great.*

Marisol made no secret of her disdain for the shop. She never came around, except when she was looking for Mateo. She thought the shop was a money pit, and Jess had to admit she might be right. Marisol also resented the time Jess and Mateo spent diving. Jess had offered to teach her for free, but the woman was deathly afraid of the water, and she wouldn't wade in beyond her waist.

Jess could have told her there was nothing to worry about. Jess knew better than to get in the middle of a relationship. She couldn't deny a lingering attraction to Mateo, but she'd made enough bad decisions in the last five years to last her a lifetime. She took her attraction to him and placed it in a box, and buried it deep inside herself. Most days, she forgot about it entirely. It helped that he wasn't around much. When he was around, she kept things professional. It was about the diving, and only the diving. And when they were underwater together, all of the shop drama faded from her mind. Even Mateo became little more than a shadow that followed her along the reef. There was nothing for Marisol to be jealous of, but the woman rebuffed all Jess' attempts at casual conversation.

And now Federica and Marisol were friends. The last thing Jess needed was for Marisol to convince Mateo to give up on the shop. Jess screwed up her courage and gave a little wave to get Marisol's attention. Marisol's laugh died. Federica turned to see who Marisol was looking at, and her eyes narrowed. Jess ignored Federica and kept her eyes on Marisol. She pointed to the road. *Let's go.* Marisol said something to Federica, who rolled her eyes. Jess turned her back to them and went back to the truck.

*They're just friends,* she told herself. *It doesn't mean anything.* But the knot in her gut didn't go away; if anything, it had gotten bigger.

"If you —drop —it —I'll —kill —you all," Jess wheezed. The compressor was perched on a large piece of plywood; Jess, George, Mateo, and Nacho each held onto a corner. They tiptoed down the gang plank at the Roatan ferry port.

"¿Cuánto pesa este hijo de puta?" Nacho asked. How much does this son of a bitch weigh?

"About —five hundred —pounds," Mateo said.

Nacho cursed and shuffled forward. Mateo and Nacho, the strongest of the group, held onto the heavier front end, with Jess and George taking up the rear. Jess' fingers and arms were on fire, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on.

"Are —we —almost —there?" she wheezed.

"Five more —steps," Mateo said.

The pickup was waiting with the tail gate flat and ready. Nacho's cousin sat at the wheel, watching them from a side mirror. More people had stopped to gape at the strange company and their even stranger cargo.

By some miracle, they got the compressor onto level ground and over to the truck without dropping it.

"There! I got —the corner. Push!" Mateo shouted.

Jess and George pushed, and the compressor slid forward onto the flat bed of the truck. It was done. *Thank God.* Jess was sweating from every pore, and she was ready to go home. Forty-eight hours on the mainland with three men had been an exhausting, frustrating experience. George had kept wandering off to meditate, and Mateo had

passed most of the time fielding calls and texts from Marisol. To make matters worse, Nacho and Mateo had almost come to blows on the ferry ride to La Ceiba. Nacho had accused Mateo of not being a "true Honduran" because of his Western education, and Mateo said Nacho wouldn't know a true Honduran if it kicked him in *el culo*. Jess had managed to diffuse the situation —barely —but now Nacho and Mateo weren't on speaking terms. The compressor purchase hadn't gone well, either. They'd argued with the seller for over an hour, since he'd insisted —after seeing Jess —that the compressor they'd ordered for one price had suddenly doubled in value. After much hand-waving, shouting, and threats, they got the price back down close enough to the original that everyone was satisfied, if not happy.

Jess spent much of the ferry trip back at the rail, pretending to need fresh air but craving solitude. The shop was coming together, but there were still a ton of work to do. She needed to work on the website, and there was a pile of regulators on the workbench in need of servicing. It was going to take hours to get the compressor up and running, but at least having their own compressor would save them money. Mateo was firm on how much he was willing to invest, and he expected to start making an income soon.

"Let's go," Jess said. Nacho brushed past Mateo —intentionally clipping him on the shoulder —and climbed into the passenger seat next to his cousin. Jess hopped up onto the flat bed next to the compressor. Mateo and George joined her, and they drove out onto the road, kicking up clouds of dust that scattered their onlookers.

"My kingdom for a cold shower," Jess said, but no one was listening. Mateo's thumbs were dancing on the screen of his phone, and George had his eyes closed. Jess reached out and squeezed George's hand.

"You doing okay, George?"

He gave a slow nod and opened his eyes. "Beat, but still kicking," he said.

"Ready to get back and take a long *siesta*. But the hand is doing great." He made a fist with his right hand.

He'd insisted on helping to carry the compressor, and Jess had been impressed with the progress he'd made. His handwriting might never be the same, but he was back to being the old George. In La Ceiba, he'd told her he was finally ready to come along on some dives.

"I'm proud of you, *papá*," she said. Father. George gave a surprised laugh, and squeezed her hand.

Jess didn't realize something was wrong until she heard Nacho give an angry shout.

"What's going —" she began, but the words died on her lips.

Across the freshly-painted green exterior of the Tree House had been scrawled the word "MURDERER" in black spray paint.

Jess stumbled off of the flatbed. *No*, she thought. The word repeated in her mind, obliterating all other thoughts. *No. No. No.*

In the yard, BCDs were scattered everywhere. Jess stepped up to one. There were cuts in the material, probably from a knife. The bladders inside would be damaged

beyond repair. From the look of the yard, she could see that all the BCDs were in the same state.

It was as if someone had reached into her chest and ripped out her heart. *All that work. And: No. Please, No.*

Nacho was cursing; Mateo was calling someone; George sat on his heels and put his hands over his eyes.

Jess, unable to stop herself, kept moving forward. The front door to the shop hung off its hinges. The interior might have been a scene from a disaster movie, except for the overwhelming odor of piss and shit. Someone had thrown excrement —*God, I hope that's from a dog*—around the room and smeared it into the walls. All her paperwork had been pissed on, and their office computer lay on the floor, the screen smashed in. She went back outside.

In the storage shed, regulators had been stacked in a pile with leftover wood from the dock construction and set on fire. The hoses had melted and fused.

Jess left the shed and sat on the ground. She had that out-of-body feeling again, like she had on the day Melissa Anderson had died. She observed the destruction of her world with a frozen calm. This time, she recognized the symptoms of shock. *All over, now.* She had no money, no job, no future.

She lost all sense of time. The cops came and took their notes, but there was nothing to be done. *Do you have enemies? Someone who would do this?* they asked.

*No,* Jess said. *No one.* A lie, of course. She knew who had done this. And she would pay.

People spoke to her. They said encouraging things. *Some of the regulators and BCDs can be salvaged. The tanks were at Hank's; the tanks are fine.* They ushered her upstairs to George's house, still intact. The vandals had only bothered to destroy the shop. *Give her some time,* George said. When she looked up again, Mateo and Nacho were gone; she didn't remember them leaving.

Hank came by. He stared at her, and nodded.

"I know what this is," he said. "Best thing to do is leave her alone until she comes around."

He left, and George went into his room and closed the door. She was sitting on the futon that doubled as her bed, but she had no idea how long she had been there.

*Murderer,* the black words had said. *Murderer.*

Something inside her broke. She *was* a murderer. She'd murdered her mother, murdered Melissa Anderson. What was one more person? What did any of it matter? She'd thought—for one brief instant—that she had a home, a family. All gone.

"You should know better," Jess said to the empty room.

#

The next morning, Jess got up early.

She was halfway out the front door when George spoke.

"Where are you going?" he said. His hair, which reached to his shoulders now, was stuck to one side of his head from sleep.

"Out," she said.



"*Mija*, it's going to be fine. We'll fix the equipment. The tanks are intact, and Nacho was out with the boat. We can still —"

"Sure, George. It'll be fine," she said. She forced herself to smile. "We'll talk more later, okay?"

She didn't wait for him to reply. She went out to the road and flagged down a bus. Since she'd lost her teaching status, Federica had worked in a tourist store, one of the places that sold Roatan t-shirts and shark tooth bottle openers and flip-flop-shaped key chains. Jess went to the bar across the street from Federica's store. There were customers inside, and she would have to wait for them to leave. She ordered a beer, but when she tried to take a sip, her hands were shaking too hard to hold it. Her heart raced, but her skin felt cool and clammy.

The tourists in the store sifted through racks of t-shirts. Jess spun the bottle between her fingertips until the beer grew warm to the touch. At last, the tourists left with their bags of junk. It was time.

Jess went in. The bell over the door jangled, and Federica turned from the stack of t-shirts she was folding.

"How can I help —"

She didn't finish her sentence. Jess ran forward and wrapped her hands around the woman's throat. Federica, too shocked to respond, clutched at Jess' fingers. Jess didn't let go. She squeezed. Her rage had full possession of her body, now; her vision was reduced to Federica's face, her shocked expression, so like Melissa Anderson's had

been. *Melissa Anderson, 27, from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. So young. So young, and I killed her.* Jess thought of her mother.

Federica's face was turning a deep shade of purple. She was going to pass out soon. It would be like drowning, Jess thought absently, like drowning on land.

She thought of her mother, and she saw again the silent film of the crash replay in her memory.

*I didn't kill her,* Jess thought then. *It wasn't my fault.*

Jess jerked herself back and released Federica's neck. Federica slumped to the floor, coughing and clutching her throat.

Jess didn't hear the bell jangle, but the next thing she knew, Mateo and George were in the shop. George helped Federica stand up.

"Jesus, Jess, what did you do?" Mateo said.

"I don't know," she said. She floated somewhere outside and above herself.

Mateo faced Federica. "I think we'll call this even," he said. His tone was cool, clinical.

Federica scowled, still clutching her throat. "I'm calling the police," she wheezed.

Mateo made a *tsking* sound. "No, you won't." He took a step forward. "I have friends. Many friends. I can make sure that you and Paolo never get a visa again. My friends can also make sure you wake up one morning in Guatemala. And trust me, you will *never* be allowed back into my county. Do you understand me?"

Federica's eyes filled with tears. "Get out," she hissed.

"Not until we have an understanding. Do we, Federica?"

Federica looked at Jess, then at George and Mateo. No one moved. She gave a brusque nod.

Jess observed all of this with a detached fascination. *Over*, she thought. *It's all over.*

She let George and Mateo usher her back out to the road.

She winced in the sunlight. A group of tourists walked by in swimsuits and sarongs, laughing. *Same-same, but different.*

Someone was saying a name. She didn't know who that person was, any more.

"Jess —look at me." Mateo. A hand cupped the side of her face. "I spoke with Paolo. He had no idea they'd actually go through with it. It was *her* —" he nodded in the direction of the store —"and Marisol. Not to mention a few of their idiot friends." He paused. His expression was stern. "Paolo's giving us some money —not a lot, but what he had —to pay for some of the damages. And Marisol —well. It's over between us."

Jess brushed his hand aside and walked away.

They didn't speak again on the bus ride back to the Tree House. She went out to the back patio and stared out at the sea. When they spoke to her, their words washed over her. Out beyond the reef, boats bobbed in the waves, carving zigzagging paths across the water. She heard the buzz of Mateo and George talking in the other room, but she didn't listen. The sun made its slow, inexorable trek down to the water, its setting obscured by a wall of clouds. The clouds turned pink and orange, and then darkened to indigo. There was no moon.

Jess blinked; a few stars shimmered in the gaps between the clouds. She got up and shook the feeling back into her legs.

Mateo was gone. George sat alone on the sofa, reading a book. *The Seagull*. A picture of a bird in flight on the cover.

He put the book down, and she was surprised to see his mouth hardened into a frown. It was unusual to see George angry.

"You are the most stubborn, self-centered individual I've ever met in my life," he began. He threw the book down on the cushion. "You won't let anyone help you. You always have to be so goddamn independent."

"I know," Jess said softly.

George opened his mouth and closed it again. Jess sat down next to him on the couch.

"I'm sorry about today," she said. "I think there's something wrong with me."

George took her hand. "I'm not going anywhere, *mija*."

Jess leaned forward and let her head fall into his shoulder. He smelled comfortingly of sweat and seawater and old man. He smelled like George. The grief washed over her then—for her mother, for her father, for Melissa. For herself. She cried without making a sound. The tears made a wet patch on George's shirt, but he didn't pull away. She knew everything he might have said, and he understood that what she needed right now was what he was giving her—something to hold on to. Someone who wouldn't leave.

#

She woke up after midnight with sheets tangled around her ankles. Outside, the clouds had cleared, and even the milky way was visible, its reflection like a grey rainbow on the surface of the water.

In the next room, George snored.

Quietly, Jess found her swimsuit under a pile of clothes and put it on. Her dive gear had escaped the destruction; she'd been doing some minor repairs, and during the vandalism, it had been upstairs next to the sofa that doubled as her bed. She lifted the bag slowly, careful not to make noise. She wasn't thinking about what she was doing, but she knew. She knew.

She went down to the shop. The door was back on its hinges. She couldn't see the graffiti, but she knew it was still there. *Murderer*, Federica had written. Had Marisol and Paolo helped? It didn't matter. It was over, now. Just inside the front door, a few cans of paint were stacked, waiting for morning. The interior of the shop stank of bleach. All trace of urine and excrement was gone except for a few dark patches on the walls. What equipment had been salvageable lay on the work table or hung from makeshift clothes lines. One or two regulators, a handful of BCDs. She was amazed at what the others been able to do in one day. It already was starting to look like a shop again. In one corner, a row of tanks, freshly-filled and brought over from Hank's shop. They glowed like silver tombstones in the beam of her dive light.

Jess slid her BCD onto one of the tanks. She put on her wetsuit and went down to the dock. The dock, also, had been undamaged by the vandals. It had been a childish act

of vengeance. Melissa's death had only been the first domino. Jess thought of the children's song. *Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.*

She hummed the song as she set her equipment down in the bottom of the boat. She untied the mooring lines and pushed off. The shore slid away. She waited until she'd drifted a good distance before yanking the pull cord. The motor sputtered to life. She almost expected George to come running out, but the windows of the Tree House remained dark.

Jess followed the coast south past West End. The bars along Half Moon Bay had long ago gone to sleep. It was still an hour or so before dawn. Around seven, the vendors and merchants and shops would open their doors and the smells of cooking food would waft in heady clouds down the street. Breakfast for the hungry divers and workers of the island. Now, the island was as quiet as a held breath, the water ahead black and full of mystery.

The red gas can in the boat's well was half-full; she thought it would be enough. The boat didn't have a headlight. She held onto the keel with one hand, and with the other extended her dive light. The black water turned blue wherever her light hit it; occasionally, moving shapes fluttered away. Fish, startled by the light. She knew the reef too well to go aground; even so, she was careful to keep the flashlight skimming right to left, and back again. She looked for the lumpy heads of coral that crested the water's surface, and steered clear.

Once away from the reef's protective barrier, the sea rose up in undulating swells. The sky was brightening in the east, but the night held on. She sat down on the pilot's

bench and steered north along the coast. She passed the nameless sand beach, recognizable only for the absence of light that contrasted with the still-lit façade of Bobby's bar.

Everyone asleep. She traced the contours of the west side of the island. Always the west. She made out the blocky, hulking shapes of the tourist resorts, their well-lit cement paths and the eerie green glow of swimming pools set back from the beach. Finally, the island came to an end at an outcropping of rocks. Like an iceberg, they were just the uppermost portion of a great, undersea world, something only divers and other sea folk understood. The boat struggled in the contradictory currents as the eastern side of the island made its presence known. Further north, further than her little boat could carry her, was the mainland, La Ceiba, with its narrow market streets and its ferry port atmosphere of people waiting to be somewhere else. She would not try for the mainland. Rather, she trailed the eastern coastline, looking for—there. A spherical orange buoy, marking the dive site. Pablo's Place.

The Wall.

As she pulled up to the buoy, she reached over and grabbed the slippery, algae-covered loop in one hand. With the other, she lifted the boat's mooring line and wrapped it through. A quick knot, and the boat was attached to the buoy line. She killed the motor, and began putting on her gear. She kept her dive light on so she could see what she was doing. There were no lights out here, no signs of habitation. It was long past the time for night dives, and all good little divers were be in bed, waiting for sunrise.

Jess let herself fall backwards over the side. She floated at the surface a moment, then reached back into the boat. She took the mesh bag she'd brought and tied it to her front BCD strap. Then she oriented herself to the wall, pointed her light towards her feet, and descended.

She didn't see anything at first. Her dive light disappeared in the murkiness below her fins. But she knew the way. She loved the silken coolness of the water, the flurry of squiggling pink worms attracted to her light's LED glow. The wall rose up out of the shadowy water in a black mass; she moved towards it, then turned so the wall paralleled her right shoulder.

She checked her gauges. Plenty of air. Forty feet. She followed the wall and emptied her BCD and sank down and down and down. No current, not this time. She paused only long enough to equalize the pressure in her ears. Sixty feet. Seventy-five. Ninety. There: the sea floor, the white sand reflecting her light back at her. A sting ray swooped across the sand and disappeared. Nothing else moved. She moved along the sandy plain, turning away from the wall now. A hundred feet, a hundred and ten. The plain of sand began to descend until it became a forty-five degree slope. Further down, a cliff, then nothing. Infinity.

Jess checked her gauges again and moved to the edge. In gravity, the steep slope would have become a slide. In weightlessness, she could perch at an angle impossible on land. Her bent legs drifted out in front of her, as if she was sitting in an invisible recliner. She pointed her light up. Her bubbles expanded upwards in curtains of reflected light. *130 feet*, her computer told her. *No Decompression Limit 13 minutes*. She needed to



hurry. She untied the mesh bag from her BCD and opened it. Inside, a Ziploc bag which she'd carefully divested of air the night before. She dragged the bag through the water and gave its contents to the sea. Her father's ashes swirled in front of her dive light. They diffused into the water around her and out into the water beyond the cliff. They swirled around her head, blown about by the bubbles from her regulator exhaust. Jess watched until she couldn't see them any more, until they became part of the sea.

*Goodbye*, she thought. She was saying goodbye to them all. Her mother. Her father. Melissa Anderson. She'd made her choice, at last.

Her computer beeped a one-minute warning. She let her light drift out over the abyss; she heard its siren call, and turned away. She made her way slowly up and back to the boat in water that didn't resist her as she moved in the direction of home. .

## 5. CONCLUSION

*"Across this sea I instantly felt a strong desire to sail. I believed it must contain an island of richer vegetation than the shore we occupied. But no one encouraged me and would be my companion. On the contrary, they intimated that I should never return."*

—Mary E. Bradley Lane, *Mizora; A World of Women*

In most women's utopian narratives, the quest for utopia is a quest for belonging. For Mary Kingsley, travel provided an entry into the restrictive world of scientific travel writing. Her practical, humorous descriptions of her pursuit of "fish and fetish" in West Africa reveal her desire to participate in the collaborative, utopian project to expand the western understanding of both other cultures and the natural world. She wrote in a time of imperialism, and her descriptions of the African landscape reflect her ambiguous position within the empire and the western scientific community. For Pauline Hopkins, Reuel Briggs' journeys between Telassar and the United States reflect her desire for African Americans to have an equal place in the nation. In her editorial and literary work, Africa becomes a unifying point of origin, a way for all African Americans to "belong" to a place in a post-slavery world. At the same time, Hopkins struggles to find a place for herself within the male-dominated publishing world of her time.

Jess' journeys are markedly different from both those of Pauline Hopkins and Mary Kingsley; Jess travels in a much more globalized world, in a time when the technology of travel makes it possible to traverse the globe in a matter of hours. Yet her

quest is also one of belonging. Jess is a woman without family ties or a distinct point of origin. Like Vera Zarovitch in *Mizora: A World of Women*, Jess must make her way through the world alone. Jess creates a "family" out of the outsiders and expatriates of Roatan: Nacho, Mateo, George. In the end, she finds a place to belong, but it is not a perfect place, because no place is perfect. In my novel, utopias are created, not found; they are a destination at which one can never arrive. Even so, the journey says much about women's desire to belong and find a better place for themselves within imperfect worlds.

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