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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE WANDERERS AND OTHER STORIES

by

Courtney Danielle Watson

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2012

ABSTRACT

THE WANDERERS AND OTHER STORIES

by Courtney Danielle Watson

May 2012

*The Wanderers and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories that explores themes of travel and isolation within interior and exterior spaces. The object of this collection is to define the point of disruption between persona and the “other” self and to evaluate the limitations of communication and language. Many of these stories reflect on the literal and metaphorical distance between people and attempt to hone in on the point of contact—and often rupture—that characterizes the fraught nature of human relationships. The collection is accompanied by a critical introduction.

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2012

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	v
POINT OF DEPARTURE.....	1
HARD TIME.....	30
THE GLASSMAKER.....	31
THE UNDERNEATH.....	34
CHECK AND TURN.....	48
ISLAMORADA.....	65
ARRYTHMIA.....	84
THE WANDERERS.....	101

## Introduction

Of the many literary terms used to describe contemporary writing, I am most intrigued by the idea of the “non-fiction novel.” Truman Capote coined the term in reference to *In Cold Blood*, but to me it seems to suggest a stylistic tendency that reaches beyond a single genre of storytelling. As a writer, I particularly identify with the idea of the “non-fiction novel” because it describes the ambiguous—and even fraught—space shared between real life and the life of the mind. It is in this space where much of my fiction writing begins.

Ideas that I explore in my short stories are generally rooted in real places or events, and it was through learning to report the truth—as I understood it—that I took the first steps toward becoming a fiction writer. For the reader, I believe that understanding my background as a reporter illuminates something essential about my approach to fiction, and especially to character development. As a result of having a job that required me to pay close attention to people and the way they behave, I try harder to create characters with depth and nuance, and who are complicated in the ways that real people are complicated. I also look at a character as a mystery to be solved, an idea that I think is best illustrated in the story “The Wanderers,” in the characters of Cara and Julia, who live two very different lives but who also have years of shared history and experience between them.

When developing the characters of Cara and Julia, I approached them like I would the subjects of an interview. This felt necessary because while their story opens at a crisis point in their lives, there is so much back story to catch the reader up on before the

present-day events can take place. An important thing that I learned as a reporter that I bring to my writing is balancing what I want to know about a character—everything—with the essential things that the reader needs to know. Back story is an inherently tricky thing, and in early drafts of a story I tend to err on the side of abundance. In that respect, my editing process for fiction mirrors the one that I use for pieces of journalism, and I make an effort to distill the characters' histories down to what is absolutely essential for the reader.

Working as a reporter in South Florida during college and an M.F.A. program, I also got the opportunity to learn about—and, more importantly, write about, many different people and lifestyles, an experience that certainly influences the situations, people, and subjects that I write about in my fiction. Reporting appeals to me because you are able to immerse yourself in someone else's world for a short time, learn everything you can within that limited space, and then move on to something completely different as soon as the article gets shipped off to the copy editor. For me, this is similar to the experience of writing a short story. I love research, and learning about lifestyles that are unfamiliar to me, and there is something appealing about gaining a new understanding of the world from real people who live those lives. The job is up close and personal by nature, and engaging in that type of contact with the subject matter shaped the way I create worlds and characters in my fiction.

During my time as a South Florida magazine reporter, I was lucky enough to get many kinds of assignments, and I think that is the reason why so much of my fiction is set in this part of the country. I love the diversity of experiences to be had there—from

the natural, wild beauty of the Everglades and the Keys, to the variety of cultures in Miami and the old cigar factories of Ybor City—and the places and people lend themselves so easily to fiction. As a fiction writer, those experiences are invaluable because they took me places that I never imagined I would go. For instance, my first-ever assignment was a profile on Bacardi, an eleven-foot alligator who lives on Big Pine Key at a place called The Blue Hole, a marshy abandoned rock quarry that is one of the most beautiful natural spaces I've ever seen. Bacardi, a tourist favorite, spends his days basking in the warm, shallow water beneath an observation platform, occasionally stretching his massive jaws to the terror and delight of everyone treated to the site. The experience of being on this island—about which I wrote several articles—evolved into “Islamorada,” about a young woman named Violet who readily absorbs, even craves, the history and culture of the nearby island of Islamorada, but who is unable to express her emotions and desires to her own family. Her memories are a conflation of her personal history and local legend and folklore, and she is unable to really connect with another person until she randomly meets a boy whose dissatisfaction with life has manifested itself in a similar way.

When writing “Islamorada,” I also drew inspiration from a trip to the Keys that I took during the annual “Hemingway Days” festival, where I heard a lecture at a bookstore about the devastating 1935 hurricane that wiped out Flagler's railroad. The tragic and disturbing story, seemed like something that would appeal to a character I had been developing in my fiction. I thought about this a lot when creating a young woman named Violet, who is struggling to come to terms with her father's departure after her

parents' divorce and reconcile what she sees as the great tragedy of her own life. She goes on a ghost tour of the area hardest hit by the storm and connects with a teenage boy who is also fascinated by the story. The local history shaped the development of both of these characters because they are more connected to the past than the present and they feel a greater affinity for stories than they do for reality. Violet, for instance, can say things to this boy that she could never say to her mother or brother because of the rupture in those relationships.

To me, communication and the metaphorical distance between people plays a large role in this story. When thinking about communication, I always seem to arrive at the same conclusion: that there can only ever be so much understanding between two people; whether they happen to speak the same language or not is irrelevant. I am also very interested in the ways that people communicate and all of the things that they don't—or can't—say to each other. There is a moment at the beginning of “Islamorada” where the image of the two women, mother and daughter, is presented and they are essentially mirroring each other in posture, image, and mannerism to the extent that Violet's brother cannot tell them apart. The two women are facing each other—in a way, they are each other, and yet they can't communicate. Violet is fixated on the idea of history to the point that she uses it as a means of communicating her ideas through her poetry and other creative outlets, and yet her own history is damaged and inaccessible because it is so fraught with bad memories and emotions. For instance, Violet can only think about her father in the context of the maritime legends and pirate stories he told her when she was a

child. I think this is why she chooses to be swept away by one of Islamorada's great tragedies rather than her own.

Many other stories that I have written trace their origin to some experience that I had while writing a newspaper or magazine article. One story that has gone through several revisions and still bears no resemblance to what I'd like it to be is "Check and Turn," which draws on experiences that I had during the three seasons that I covered the sport of polo for a publisher in Wellington, Florida, the winter polo capital of the world. Polo is a wonderful game to watch, equal parts exciting and brutal, and largely misunderstood. The title of the story refers to a polo maneuver that involves leading a pony away from collision during the frantic heat and confusion of a polo match.

I got a thorough education in the sport during the many hours that I spent watching expert South American players practice what they still call "stick and ball." It was during this time that I gained an understanding of the real joy and exhilaration that players and fans find in the sport, and in my story I attempt to capture their enthusiasm. I got to know players and trainers and farm hands who had never been off the Argentinian estancias they grew up on before they started following the polo circuit from New York to Florida to Santa Barbara to Europe. I interviewed a professional equine masseuse and attended auctions where polo ponies were sold for staggering prices. I met team owners; the character of Teddy Townsend in "Check and Turn" is actually based on Skeeter Johnston, owner of the team Skeeterville, who died of severe head injuries sustained during a practice at the polo club where I had attended matches.

Of everything that I learned while working as a reporter, I think that the one thing that has been most valuable to my fiction was learning how to identify what matters the most to a person and finding a way to demonstrate that in a story. I don't think I would be able to do this if it weren't for my daily interactions with people and the specific circumstances under which I met them, which essentially forced me to find the essence of what was important to them in a small amount of time and to make that emerge in the articles I wrote.

Of course, my years as a journalist only contributed in part to my evolution as a writer. My work has also—and to a far greater extent—been shaped by the books and stories that I read. My favorite essayist, Anne Fadiman, has written several essays about the journeys a reader takes through literature that I identify with both as a reader and as a writer. One idea of hers that is particularly important to me explores the importance of place to the reading experience. I think a lot about place and setting and location when I am writing a story, but Fadiman's essay “You Are There” really enhanced my understanding of how place and setting function in my own writing and contribute to their degree of verisimilitude. Fadiman writes:

What makes You-Are-There Reading so much more thrilling to us buffs than You-Are-Somewhere-Else Reading? I think it's because the mind's eye isn't literal enough for us. We want to walk into the pages, the way Woody Allen's Professor Kugelmass walked into *Madame Bovary*, triggering a flurry of scholarly confusion about the bald New Yorker in a leisure suit who had suddenly appeared on page 100. Failing that, the nearest we can come to Macaulay's living “amidst

the unreal” is to walk into a book's physical setting. The closer we get, the better...The consummate You-Are-There experience requires us, like Macaulay, to see *exactly* what the author described, so that all we need do to cross the eidetic threshold is squint a little (66-67).

I have loved this quotation since the first time I read it several years ago, though it was only through many subsequent readings of the essay that I really began to understand what Fadiman is talking about and how I can relate it to the way that I think about place in my own work. I am drawn to stories and novels written by writers who have a particularly strong sense of place: Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Barbara Kingsolver. When considering the places that I create in my own fiction, which are often at least partially based on places that I know well, I want to create the place vividly enough that my reader would recognize it from my work if he or she happened upon it.

Many stories and novels have contributed to the way that I think about literature and storytelling, though one stands out at this moment in my life. I first read Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* as a senior in high school, and I can identify this particular novel as one that profoundly contributed to my understanding of art and also of the relationship between the artist and the audience. When I think about writers whose style I admire and whose careers I would like to emulate, Ann Patchett is always at or near the top of the list. I deeply admire her illustrations of place and the depth of the worlds that she creates—imaginary spaces so real you feel like you really could just walk into the pages.

What speaks to me the most about the topics that Patchett explores are her ideas about beauty, and how the creation of art is the creation of something inherently beautiful. In one of my favorite passages of *Bel Canto*, one of the Russian hostages talks about how the greatest gift that he was ever given was a treasured book of artistic masterpieces from his grandmother, a book that he revered because it taught him how to appreciate beauty. Patchett writes:

I could have had one life but instead I had another, because of this book my grandmother protected. What miracle is that? I was taught to love beautiful things. I had a language in which to consider beauty. Later that extended to the opera, to the ballet, to architecture I saw, and even later still I came to realize that what I had seen in the paintings I could see in the fields or a river. I could see it in people.... There have to be those who witness the art, who love and appreciate what they have been privileged to see. (218-219)

This passage captures my own feelings about beauty and art, and the ways in which art captures and distills the happiest and most worthwhile parts of life, as well as its complexity. I agree with the idea that loving beauty—whether in a soprano's high-C or the glint of an alligator's scales in the sunlight—is also to love life, and I believe that art is the ultimate expression of that feeling.

In addition to her construction of place, there are many aspects of Ann Patchett's writing—both her fiction and her non-fiction—that I admire, and I identify with her work more so than that of any other contemporary novelist. Her ideas about love and friendship and searching speak to me, as does the depth and scope of the research that goes into her

work. Whether Patchett is writing about opera in *Bel Canto* or pharmaceutical research in the rain forest in *State of Wonder*, her worlds are so fully formed that it seems like there is no end to her knowledge on the subjects about which she writes. It is this sense of verisimilitude that I strive for when building the world of my own fiction.

One of my greatest joys as a writer comes from the research process, of being totally immersed in the minutiae of another world for days or weeks on end. This collection's first story, "Point of Departure," displays this particularly well as it tells of a woman named Diana who follows her husband to the bottom of the world. Set in the farthest reaches of Patagonia in a town called Ushuaia, Diana finds herself feeling utterly abandoned until the unexpected arrival of her teenage step-daughter. I was compelled to write this story after reading a two-sentence snippet in an old South American travel guide; the guide described Ushuaia as being little more than a way station for tourists and scientific researchers traveling to Antarctica—the last bit of civilization before journeying into one of the few spaces on the planet that still remains largely unmapped and undiscovered. Reading those two sentences in that travel guide unlocked that world for me, and I had to know more.

The motto of the town of Ushuaia is wonderful: "The end of the world and the beginning of everything." This phrase more than anything opened up the possibilities of that world for me. I wanted to know more about it. I wanted to know everything. I don't remember exactly, but it seems to me that the story lived inside of my head for several weeks, being added to and revised as I got more and more information, before I actually wrote any of it down. While my writing process is somewhat orderly and structured,

when gathering research I am a magpie, collecting shiny bits here and there and depositing them in a sharp, glittery nest that will eventually—hopefully—become a story.

I read everything about the town of Ushuaia that I could find—though admittedly there isn't a lot of information to work with—and as I read I realized that the people I would be writing about would have to be outsiders in the town, tourists or scientists just passing through. This, naturally, led to the question about where they were ultimately going and why. Taking the town's motto into consideration, I knew that I needed to find out why their world was ending at this particular time and place, and also what their new beginnings would be. Another question that gave me pause was this: what would bring a person to the bottom of the world if it was not a place they were naturally inclined to travel? You don't go to the end of the world without good reason, and the answer that most appealed to me was love.

Diana and Sam's marriage is complicated by Sam's devotion to his work. He is a marine biologist researching the pharmaceutical potential of a kind of sea kelp that lives only in the Arctic Ocean. This idea came to me directly from the magpie nest, taken from something I heard about underwater Arctic forests in a documentary about Antarctica that was featured OnDemand one night. There was magic in phase “Arctic sea forests” for me; it conjured images of spiderwebs of white ice suspended in the cobalt sea. Unfortunately, Arctic seaweed doesn't look any different from the stuff that washes up on the Gulf beaches that I grew up on. When writing that into the story, I decided that Diana needed to be as disappointed about that as I was.

As with every other story that I write, this one grew out of bits and pieces of images and interesting turns of phase that I collected during the research process. The story emerged from fragments: maps, folklore about the giants of Patagonia, the Google Space view of Palmer Station, a research outpost home to biologists, astronomers, and environmental scientists. I read historical accounts written by Antarctic explorers Shackleton and Amundsen, as well as Anne Fadiman's white fantasies about the furthest reaches of the known world, and I found the experience of living in that space to be thrilling. I spent many autumn days reading these accounts in a family room that glowed with southern sunshine and at the end of the day I would be chilled to the bone.

Possibly due to the fact that I assemble my stories from small pieces, the idea of aggregation, and the way that it functions as a literary technique, interests me very much. I like the idea of a story as a mosaic or some other piece of physical art that is composed of pieces; as a writer, I'm always curious about the seams in the work and the places where it comes undone, or about pieces that don't match or don't fit exactly. To me, a work of art does not have to be homogeneous thing, carved from something large and solid like marble to be sculpted and polished into something that is perfect and seamless and beautiful. Art, like life, is living and ragged and there are strings that you shouldn't pull but you do anyway, because you must. It is that moment, when the whole thing is on the verge of falling apart, that as a writer I find to be irresistible.

Like Joan Didion in works such as *A Book of Common Prayer*, I am interested in exploring worlds that have been shattered into fragments, which must be sifted through and examined individually in order to create some semblance of understanding, if there is

to be any understanding at all. Rather than creating a whole new world from scratch, I often feel like I'm recreating something from interesting artifacts that have been left behind. I think this is how a story like "Point of Departure" emerges from Shackleton's notebooks and legends of giants and long-distance Valentine's.

I'm in Houston now, rerouted and laid over a thousand miles from where I'm headed. It doesn't surprise me that I'm writing the introduction to my dissertation in an airport, surrounded by people en route to somewhere else, none seeming too put out by the delays in getting there.

On my drive to the Gulfport-Biloxi airport this morning, not for a moment did I imagine that I would be in Houston, now, huddled with my fellow journeymen around a Samsung power bank at Gate C42 like it's a campfire. I'm alone, among strangers: a dignified Indian man sits next to me, the soft backlighting of his charging iPad reflecting against his face as he eats a butter-pecan ice cream cone. On the other side of me is a hipster. His laptop is open but his eyes are glued to the television, where Whitney Houston's funeral plays on a loop. I would have been riveted, too, but I've already seen this part; I watched it at a diner counter with a traveling baseball player at another airport this morning. The cook made me a grilled cheese, even though it's not on the menu, and the waitress, ballplayer and I talked about how much we all loved Whitney.

In Houston, right now, we are all waiting. In this moment, my fellow passengers and I live here, in this space between places. This space is a familiar one for me, and, I think as a result, it is where my characters often find themselves: laid over, suspended in the interstice between one life and another, ready for the next journey to begin.

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## POINT OF DEPARTURE

The night before Sam left on his trip to Anvers Island, a research outpost on the northern-most fringe of Antarctica, was one of their worst. Diana listened from the kitchen as Sam walked down the hall and dropped his old duffel bag by the front door. She wondered what he'd forgotten this time.

“That's it. Three weeks worth of stuff packed in twenty minutes. It might be a personal best,” Sam said, hovering in the doorway. It was after midnight when Sam walked into the kitchen of their cottage, where Diana liked to do her work at the massive butcher block table, and he looked tired but there was a warm glow in his cheeks. Diana stared at the screen, typing things that she would have to erase later and making notes that meant nothing.

“Are you coming to bed?” Sam asked.

“No.”

They were a year into a research trip that was supposed to have lasted two months, and it was on nights like this, when all the empty weeks stretched in front of her, that Diana hated Sam. And Ushuaia, the town where they rented a cottage at the southern tip of Argentina. It was the gateway through which thousands of tourists and scientists passed every year, following the ghosts of Magellan and Drake, Darwin and Amundsen to what was once the edge of the known world. In a letter she wrote not long after her arrival, Diana told her brother about the town's motto: the end of the world, the beginning of everything. Back then, she'd thought that it sounded romantic. Diana knew better now. “They have the end of the world part right, anyway,” Diana thought to herself, running her fingers over her too-hot keyboard. And Sam was leaving her here alone, again.

Sam ran his hands through his auburn hair, which had thinned in the past few months. “I can't do this tonight, Diana. I don't want to...”

She glanced at him, and then back at the screen.

“I asked you to come with me. You hate the boat. You hate the island, and the cold, and everything about what I do down there, and I still asked.”

Diana said nothing, kept typing. Sam made a laughing, choking noise. He was wearing an old college t-shirt and the red plaid pajama pants from a set Diana's mother had sent for Christmas. He knew Diana liked them.

“It doesn't matter. This'll be the last trip anyway. If we don't make some progress, they're going to pull our funding. You know that, right?” Sam said.

Diana did know that, of course she did, because it was all that Sam had talked about since his last two trips to the sites off Anvers Island, where he and his crew had discovered a lot more of the same stuff they'd been finding for months.

In the beginning, Diana had been fascinated by Sam's research, and she still loved the way his face lit up when he talked about his diving expeditions into the polar algae forests. In Diana's mind, they were ghostly and beautiful, haunting meadows of underwater flora that shone in the water like spun glass. When she finally visited the lab and saw the specimens for herself, she'd been a bit disappointed to see the slimy masses of red and brown kelp that looked exactly like all the other seaweed she'd ever seen.

“Whatever, I'm going to bed. Maybe we can try this again in the morning,” Sam said. He hesitated at the doorway, left, and then came back again a few moments later. He crossed his arms in front of him. Diana looked up from the screen and raised her eyebrows.

“I'm sorry I'm leaving again. I know you don't like it here and that you don't know anyone, but you knew about this project when you agreed to come with me. It's taken a few months longer than I thought it would, but I told you that might happen. I told you what to expect. You knew what you were getting yourself into. You knew what my job was like when you married me.”

Color rose in his cheeks and he crossed the kitchen so that he was standing in front of her, over her. Diana looked up at him, at his tired gray eyes and at the lines tracing his forehead and the mouth that so readily formed the crooked smile that she loved. Sam wasn't smiling now.

“I knew what your job was, Sam. I just thought you were better at it,” Diana said.

After Sam left, shaking his head, Diana stared at the clock on her computer as her vision blurred. “I hate myself for saying that,” Diana thought. “I hate him for making it feel good to say something so mean.” Diana pressed her shoulder blades into the kitchen chair, feeling more relaxed than she had all day—like a pressure valve had been released.

It was an agony that Diana had stupidly assumed would be alleviated by marriage: the question of whether or not the person she loved was truly hers. Only hers. Before Sam, the answer had always eventually been no; the truth revealed itself in sly fingers sliding across touch screens craving missed texts and e-mails. Like she wouldn't notice. Sam wasn't like that, though. He still wasn't like that. It would have actually been easier if her competition had dewy skin and a winsome smile. Did the universe really expect her to put up a fight against kelp?

Sam hadn't been lying. Diana hated the expeditions to the algae forests. “Does he know how hard it is to get on a boat knowing that you're going to be wet and freezing for

the next three weeks?” Diana had asked herself as she stuffed sweaters and thermal socks and battery-operated heating pads into a suitcase that looked a whole lot bigger on the outside. Diana distinctly remembered that it was the day before her second, and last, trip to Palmer Station, which served as a base camp for their ventures further south. Sam, who had once been able to deal with Diana's abundance of luggage with good humor, had eyed her stack of stuff with dismay.

“What is all this? You can't possibly need all of this stuff. What on earth is that?” Sam knelt down and touched a blue nylon vest equipped with a small battery pack that looked like a heart monitor. He raised his eyebrows, but he was smiling.

“It's insulated with gel. The battery heats it to warm you up. I found it in SkyMall,” Diana said.

“I love you, Diana. So much.”

“I got you one too.”

Sam stood and looked at all of Diana's stuff with what she assumed was renewed interest.

It was late, and Diana had been doing what she called “panic packing.” It was hard to say what she'd find when she unpacked them on the boat.

“It's hard, because I never know what I'll need once we get down there,” Diana tried to explain. “I'm not cut out for your white world, Sam. Couldn't we find a nice spot on the equator to drop anchor? Let the sun pin me to the sand on nice beach and you won't hear a peep out of me, I swear.”

Sam had smiled. “I doubt that.”

It wasn't just clothes and cold-weather implements—Diana brought other stuff too: pictures, beach-scented candles that smelled like sunlight and hot sand, books that helped her feel at home wherever she went. Somehow, Sam didn't need any of that.

“Pare down. Get rid of everything that you don't absolutely need. That's what I do. Try it. You'll be surprised at all the things you can learn to live without.”

Call it prescience, or perhaps paranoia, but Diana hadn't liked that statement when Sam said it all those months ago. She'd found it oddly hurtful. She liked it even less now. Diana thought about the single duffel bag sitting by the door and her throat burned. She stared at the screen until the colors melted together like stained glass.

As Sam's boat pulled out of the harbor the next morning, all Diana felt was relief. She'd apologized for being mean and Sam said he was sorry for leaving her, again. They would work it out when he got back. They always did.

Diana watched the boat until it disappeared into the Beagle Channel, and then she walked into the main part of town. Ushuaia was a place where locals and tourists alike got started early, and the street along the harbor's promenade was already crowded with elbows and voices echoing in half a dozen languages that Diana didn't understand. Though some English was spoken in the tourist district, the prevalence of Spanish, Portuguese, and German made it difficult enough for Diana to accomplish day-to-day tasks like going to the store, much less making friends.

Diana stopped at the bakery down the street from her home and ordered a fried pastry filled with sticky-sweet guava paste for breakfast and an empanada for later. The bakery was full of regulars—a mechanic who sat at the bar and flirted with the waitresses, an elderly man who ate his eggs slowly and poured honey over toast, a young

man with his body curved over a sketchbook, his fingers black with charcoal. Something in Diana throbbed with the desire to talk to them, any of them, about anything. Somehow, none of them seemed to be alone.

“You'll eat here?” the woman behind the counter asked, already reaching for a square of wax paper to wrap up the pastries.

Diana shook her head. “Not today.”

“I'm home,” Diana said to no one after she walked into the house. It felt much emptier in Sam's absence. The small blue clapboard rental cottage reminded her of a house in a fishing village in Maine. Diana went straight to her bedroom. The bed was unmade and the air was still humid from the shower Sam had taken earlier that morning. The phone base on the nightstand was blinking red, but Diana ignored it and laid down. The pillows smelled like sea salt and aftershave, and Diana went to sleep thinking about her husband and his spectral forests of polar algae.

When Diana woke up many hours later, the red light was still blinking. She reached for the phone and dialed for her voice mail. There were seven messages. Sighing, Diana reluctantly pressed the button and listened to the first one. A moment later she sat bolt upright in bed and grabbed a pen and paper off the nightstand. It was about Sam's daughter.

“Your ex is in rehab. Melissa's dad called and said she entered a 90-day program,” Diana said. She was sitting in her favorite spot in the cottage, on the stone hearth as close as she dared to an old radiator, which blazed all year round.

“Jesus. What happened?” Sam asked. His voice barely cut through the sat-com static of the phone they used aboard the ship; it was like having a conversation with someone underwater.

“I'm not really sure. George was more concerned about Lara.”

“Is she okay? How's she taking it?” Sam's voice echoed amidst a background of blips and buzzes. There were other voices too; scientists and excited grad students talking over one another in the close quarters of the interior of the ship. It was a nice enough boat, funded through a sizable commitment from the University of Alabama's marine science program, whose support Sam was afraid of losing. The cabin was noisy and crowded, but it was the only haven from the wind shears that cut through clothes and skin like icy teeth. From the warmth of her kitchen, Diana shivered at the remembered chill.

“Well, that's the thing,” Diana said.

“What? Isn't she with George and Linda?” Sam asked.

“She was. She has been for the past year, actually. Did you know that?”

“Yeah, she mentioned it.” Sam's voice rose and fell with the motion of the boat, and the thought of bobbing up and down in the cold black water for weeks on end made Diana feel seasick.

“Sam, Lara left this morning,” Diana said.

“She what? Like she ran away?”

“No. Well, sort of. She's coming here. She had a layover during her flight from Chicago to Miami. She called me from Atlanta. Lara said she wants to see you.”

All Diana heard through the phone were waves of static and wind. Silence is an

expensive commodity on a satellite phone, and Sam was rarely inclined to waste research funding.

“Damn it,” Sam finally said.

“I know. It's not a great situation.”

“Who let her get on a plane to South America by herself? She's 14.”

“She's 15. And apparently her mother got her a passport when they went to Cozumel a few years ago. They didn't even know where Lara was until she called them from the gate.”

Sam groaned. “I do not need this right now.”

“I pulled up Lara's flight information. She has an overnight layover in Panama City and another in Buenos Aires, and then a straight-through to here on Tuesday morning,” Diana said. There was no such thing as an easy trip to the end of the world. She waited for Sam to say something, and when he didn't she continued.

“I told Lara that you probably wouldn't be back yet and that I'd pick her up at the airport. She said that was okay,” Diana said. It was the first time she'd spoken to Sam's daughter, ever. He talked to her every few weeks or so. All Diana had to go on were bits and pieces from Sam: Lara liked swimming and reading, and she'd loved riding horses ever since Sam had started sending her to sleep-away camp on a ranch in Wyoming every summer. Lara had been the product of a college relationship that soon fizzled, and Sam hadn't ever been a big part of her life. There was no formal custody arrangement, and Sam rarely saw the girl, but Diana could tell that he loved her. He just seemed unclear about how to fit her into his life.

“Well I can't leave. We just got started,” Sam said.

Diana paused. “You're not coming home? Seriously?”

“We just got here. What do you want me to do, have them turn the boat around?”

Yes, Diana said silently, of course that's what you're supposed to do, but aloud she said nothing. Sam's silence was equally expectant.

“Diana, please.”

“What am I supposed to do with her? Lara's coming down here to see you, not me. She doesn't even know me.”

“I'm sorry. I'll figure something out when I get home, but I can't deal with this right now. I have to focus on my work. You know that I might not get another chance if this project doesn't get completed. We're so close to getting the specimens we need. It's going to happen this time, I know it.”

“Alright,” Diana said.

“Really?” Sam sounded surprised, but Diana knew that he wasn't.

“Yes, really.”

“Thank you. Tell Lara I'll be home in a couple of weeks or so. Tell her I'll e-mail her. I've got to go.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Love you. Bye.”

Diana was going to say something else to her husband, but Sam was already gone.

In person, Sam's daughter looked older than Diana had expected. In the pictures he'd sent from his computer on the boat—blurry images transmitted from a research vessel hundreds of miles away, somewhere off the coast of Antarctica—Lara had looked no more than ten. Diana rubbed her eyes and leaned against her car, which she'd pulled into the lot right next to the tiny private airport.

Diana felt a familiar sense of panic expand in her diaphragm and block her airway until she was gasping for breath. She inhaled through her nose and watched the seconds tick by on her watch to calm herself down. Kids were an unknown quantity for Diana, and the idea of Lara made her nervous.

Diana didn't remember sleeping at all the previous night. There were only three photos of Lara. Diana had sat on the bed the night before, studying the soft-cheeked child who looked nothing like Sam. The girl walking down the steps of the small plane was taller than Diana and thin in the way that only teenagers can be, flesh pulled taut over bone. Lara stepped onto the tarmac at the airstrip and looked around uncertainly until she was nudged in the back by the person coming off the plane behind her and forced to move out of the way. Lara stood there, looking lost and bewildered, but for some reason Diana couldn't move. The gray-veiled sky gave no hint as to where the sun might be, and a light but persistent mist seeped through Diana's clothes and raised chill bumps on her skin. Mentally, Diana cursed her husband.

Finally, as the passengers cleared the tarmac and the lone flight attendant got off the plane, Diana couldn't handle seeing the girl standing there by herself any longer and she walked toward her. Even at thirty yards, the terrified, oh-no-what-have-I-done look on Lara's face was plain, and Diana certainly couldn't hold that against her. Her mother was locked away she had traveled over seven thousand miles away from home to see the father she barely knew and instead she got Diana, who she knew not at all.

“Lara?” Diana called out to her over the sounds of people greeting each other and the dry whirl of an ascending plane. The girl looked up and nodded, and Diana could see the disappointment on her face.

“I'm Diana,” she said. She didn't know what to do with her arms.

“Hi. It's nice to meet you,” Lara said.

“Sam—your dad wanted to be here but the boat was already so far away when I got the call. Sam's really sorry. When he heard, he'd wanted to come and get you himself, but it all happened so fast.”

Lara looked at Diana. “It's fine. Really. I just wanted to get here.”

Lara looked nothing like Sam or the pictures Diana had seen of Melissa. Her coloring and features were her own. The girl's face was dark and memorable, with olive skin and high cheekbones and a wide mouth that she hadn't quite grown into yet. Lara's eyes were dark and there was a depth and richness to her coloring that reminded Diana of an oil painting.

“Sam isn't coming, is he?” Lara asked. After they dropped Lara's bags off at the cottage, Diana had taken her to a small 1950s American-style diner around the corner. A neon jukebox blared Jerry Lewis through the greasy air and a waitress brought them warm glass bottles of Coke with long candy-striped straws. The diner was tacky, yes, but it reminded Diana of the tacky fifties-style diners at home. And the food wasn't bad.

“Not right away. He's stuck out in the field with his research team. He wants to be here, though,” Diana said. She stared at her menu, even though there were only about four items that she recognized.

“You said that. What's a *barros luco*?” Lara asked. She pointed her finger at a sticky spot on Diana's menu.

“It's sort of like a cheeseburger. They're pretty good, actually. Do you eat meat?”

“Yeah.”

“That's good. Argentina has some of the best beef in the world.”

“So where is my dad exactly?” Lara asked.

Exactly? Diana had no idea. Sam's office was full of maps and graphs and tidal charts and he had marked the coordinates of his field research parameters with strings wrapped around tiny red-tipped pins, but to Diana the project looked inconceivable. One map was the size of a parking space and took up the better part of a wall, and on it Sam's research sites looked like tiny, haphazard fingernail clippings.

“Right now, I'm not sure. They'll spend a few days diving and collecting specimens in the shallower waters along the coast and then they'll dock at Palmer Station on Anvers Island and run some tests and then they'll go back for more samples.”

A waitress in a bright pink dress with a white apron came to their table. She was young and gave them a bored smile and said hello and how are you in rapid Spanish. She smelled like hairspray and with her thick fringe of black bangs she looked like Betty Page. She'd waited on Diana before and knew that she only spoke English, and she just nodded when Diana pointed at the items they wanted—two *barros luco*—and collected the menus. Once she left, Diana returned her attention to Lara. It felt odd to be sitting across the table from her husband's daughter.

Lara stared at Diana, who sensed that she was about to be interrogated. That was fine. Diana had questions too.

“How long have you known my dad?” Lara asked. She was sitting on her jacket in the cracked red vinyl booth and Diana was pleased to see that she'd had the sense to wear layers. It was the near the end of the astral summer—the only time of year that Sam could conduct his research out in the field—and the temperature was in the low fifties. Six hundred miles south at Palmer Station, where Sam and his team would bring the

specimens they collected during their dives, it would be in the thirties. Winter was much, much worse.

“Two years. What's your favorite subject in school?”

“Italian. Do you have a job?”

“I copy edit articles and manuscripts for a publishing house in Miami. That's how I met your dad, actually. We did a profile on him. You speak Italian?” Diana asked.

“Not yet, but I really like the sound of it. How old are you?” Lara asked. Her eyes were bright, curious. Diana noticed that she had a habit of pulling at the corners of her eyebrows. Sam did something similar with his hair.

“I'm 28.”

“You're a lot younger than my mom. She's 37. My dad's 35.”

Diana nodded. “I know. Did you tell your mother that you were coming down here?”

“No. We don't talk much. I mean, we didn't before...now we don't talk at all. I've mostly been living with my grandparents.”

“How's that going?”

“They're old,” Lara said. Lara put her arms down on the table in front of her. On one of her wrists was a beaded turquoise bracelet with a tiny hummingbird charm, carved out of bone, which Diana recognized from her last trip to the famed street fair in Buenos Aires. She didn't like the idea Lara leaving the airport during her layover and wandering around that city alone.

“What about school? Aren't you missing it?” Diana asked.

Lara shook her head. "I was on Christmas break when my mom started getting worse. I decided not to go back. I enrolled myself in home school. The box with everything in it for this quarter should be here next week."

Diana wasn't sure what look passed across her face when Lara's long-term intentions became clear, but the girl's response was a look of pleading.

"Please don't send me back there. My dad will understand. I don't like living with my grandparents, and when my mother gets out I don't want to live with her either. I don't like her. We just don't get along."

Two red spots appeared on Lara's cheeks as she became more anxious and she said once again, "My dad will understand."

Diana wondered about that, and what Lara thought she knew about Sam. She thought about Sam's parents, Max and Lilly, who lived on a golf course in Clearwater Beach and who delighted in the adventures of their brilliant, intrepid son. He'd had good role models.

"Lara's, it's okay. You'll get your chance to see your dad. I get it. When I was your age, I didn't like my mother either."

"Do you get along with her now?" Lara wrapped her delicate hands around her glass Coca-Cola bottle and Diana noticed that her fingernails were painted cobalt blue and it made her smile.

"Here comes our food," Diana said.

In fact, Diana still wasn't on great terms with her mother, Goldie. They spoke occasionally and exchanged postcards when they traveled, but Diana, who had never known her father, had stopped depending on her mother for anything a very long time

ago. Diana told Lara as much during a walk one afternoon about a week after Lara arrived. The sky was clear and the air was cold as they walked along the promenade that paralleled the harbor.

“She never got the hang of the whole parenting thing, my mother,” Diana said. She vividly remembered the vaguely puzzled look that Goldie got on her lovely face when their paths crossed. The problem wasn't animosity, but maybe ambivalence. Goldie seemed to love Diana, but she'd never really gotten to know her. For her part, Diana knew as much about her mother as she cared to.

“Was she mean? Or crazy? Mine is crazy,” Lara said. Diana had heard as much from Sam, and whenever he'd talked about his ex's struggles with addiction she'd wondered why he hadn't pushed Melissa for custody of Lara. Sam had always said that Lara's grandparents provided stability that he couldn't because of the amount of travel associated with his job, but he'd somehow missed the fact that she wasn't happy there.

They'd spoken to Sam twice and during their last, brief call he'd announced that his work was progressing. He didn't sound great. Sam and his team were scheduled to return in two weeks. As apprehensive as she'd been about being on her own with Sam's daughter, Diana found that she actually enjoyed Lara's company. It was nice not to be alone all the time.

“No, my mom wasn't mean or crazy. She did get married a lot, though,” Diana said. For the past six years, Goldie had been living in South Florida with her fifth husband, a retired textile manufacturer named Herb.

“It's really beautiful here. Dad never mentioned that,” Lara said.

“It is,” Diana agreed. The landscape was something that she'd never paid particular attention to, but the views were striking. The town was bordered by snow-

capped mountains on one side and a deep sapphire sea on the other. Everything in between was green and vibrant. The air was savory with the crisp and char of street food and interesting people bustled about everywhere. Just that afternoon, Diana and Lara had been invited to share a table at a crowded restaurant with a group of chatty climatologists en route to the South Pole.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Lara asked. She stopped walking and took her digital camera out of the pocket of her jeans. Diana followed her gaze down to the beach, where a gang of small, fat penguins was gathered on the dark brown sand. It was a rare sight because they usually stuck to the outer islands, and Lara was delighted. Diana smiled and took out her own camera and took a picture of the penguins with Lara laughing in the foreground.

“I don't have any biological siblings, but I am really close to my step-brother Jack from my mom's third marriage. We grew up together and he's my best friend. He's a photographer in D.C. He came down to visit a couple of months ago,” Diana said. When Diana was 16 and fed up with living at home, Jack, who was only three years older than her, had taken Diana in and made her finish school. She didn't like to think of what could've become of her if Jack hadn't been around.

“He's the only one?” Lara asked.

There had been other kids, but none that Diana had cared to keep up with after their parents' had parted ways. “Yep. Just Jack. Sometimes you have to find your family, I think. I have some really good friends though, too.”

“Are you and my dad going to have any children?”

“No, Sam doesn't want any,” Diana said. Thinking about what she'd just said, she smiled at Lara and added, “He's happy just to have you.”

After that day, Diana and Lara settled into a routine. Lara's box of home school assignments arrived on schedule along with a stack of manuals for Diana to edit. They worked in the mornings and explored in the afternoons. Diana was embarrassed when she realized how little she knew about the place where she had been living for nearly a year; she'd moved to Ushuaia to be with Sam and have an adventure, but instead she'd shut out the world.

With Lara there, Diana found herself suddenly interested in the town that existed beyond the cold and fog that she woke up to every day outside her kitchen window. With Lara there, Diana finally saw why the place had such a thriving tourist industry. Ushuaia wasn't a remote outpost of civilization, but a place rich in wildlife and history, exploration and myth. The town's motto didn't seem quite so silly now. With Lara's arrival, Diana sensed the possibility of a new beginning for all of them.

Lara reminded Diana of Sam. She was quiet, pensive at times. Lara looked on the Internet and found stables in the nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park and talked Diana into going riding with her on the trail. It was a hushed, lovely place, cold and green, and the old horses—retired polo ponies from a local estancia—were slow and patient.

“Why didn't you go with my dad?” Lara asked. Her horse, a sweet palomino, clopped on the trail alongside Diana's. The air smelled like wet trees and moss and the green canopy overhead blocked the view of the gray sky.

“I didn't want to, I guess. I don't do very well on boats. And the air down there. It's very dry and so, so cold. The first time I went my nose bled every day for a week. And the boat is crowded, and you don't have any privacy at all. Anyway, your dad's always working on those trips, so it's not like I actually get to see him.”

Lara was quiet for so long that Diana thought the topic had passed, but then she said, “But still. It's a long time to be away from each other. If he ever asked me to go, I'd do it.”

Diana smiled. “I know you would.”

They continued on in silence for a while. Diana appreciated her horse's solid steadiness. Retired or not, he was a pro. She hadn't ridden a horse in years and though she knew that she'd be sore the next day, she was having a nice time and she thought that Lara was too. It might be a nice thing for the three of them to do together when Sam got back. A light mist of cold rain touched the top of Diana's head like a kiss and a chill pressed itself into her clothes.

“You never met my mother, did you?” Lara asked.

“No.”

“Does my dad talk about her?”

“Not really,” Diana said.

“When I was younger, I always thought that he would come and get me if she went over the edge. Then she did, again and again, and he never came. He e-mailed me from all of these fantastic places and sent me souvenirs, but he was never there. When I moved in with my grandparents for good last year, I thought that then he would finally get it. That he *had* to do something. I wrote to him, I told him I wasn't happy, and do you know what he did? He paid for two extra weeks at summer camp.”

Diana cringed. “Did you tell him that you wanted to see him?”

Lara nodded. “Of course. But he was always busy.”

“I didn't know that you e-mailed him so much.”

“It didn't do any good. Most of the time, I think he tries to pretend he doesn't have a daughter.”

“That's not true, Lara,” Diana said, though the evidence against Sam was pretty damning. She hadn't known about the girl until months into her relationship with Sam.

“It is. You know it is. But I don't accept it, and I'm going to change his mind. He's going to hear me out.”

One week went by without a word from Sam. Then another. The phone didn't ring, and e-mails went unanswered. The day before his boat was scheduled to return, Diana received a terse e-mail from Sam, which she read with Lara looking over her shoulder.

Diana,

I'm making progress with some colleagues at the station, and I won't be returning with the crew on Saturday. I need more time. Please send Lara home. I'll deal with it when I come back.

Sam

“Deal with it?” Lara said. It was morning, and they had been working across from each other at the big table in the warm little kitchen. Diana had been editing while Lara worked on an interactive language module where a voice spoke a simple phrase in Italian and Lara repeated it. Diana had no idea what was being said, but like her step-daughter she liked the way it sounded.

“Lara, I don't think he meant it that way,” Diana said. It had been another peaceful morning; they'd eaten breakfast and discussed taking a trip back to the park in Patagonia

with Sam once he returned. A knot of anxiety that Diana hadn't felt since the morning Lara arrived tightened in her chest.

“Diana, stop. It's bullshit.” Lara's face, usually so calm, was bright with anger. The knot in Diana's chest loosened and turned hot. Something changed inside of her, and Diana felt her loyalty shift.

“You're right, Lara. It is bullshit,” Diana said.

Lara moved through the cottage, grabbing an old backpack of Sam's and stuffing things into it: her purse, a jacket, her Kindle, her long brown hair whipping behind her. Diana followed her. “What are you doing? Where are you going?”

Lara shoved a scarf into the pack. “I'm going there. To the station. He can't ignore me if I'm right in front of him.”

At that moment, Diana knew two things for certain: Sam wasn't going to be thrilled about this, and she didn't care. Diana also knew that Lara wasn't going alone.

The *Ellie Mae* was a mid-sized supply boat that delivered scientists and equipment to the station on Anvers Island during the astral summer months. It was captained by a husband and wife team named Hans and Birdie. They were a sturdy pair—tall and blond, with glacial eyes—and while Diana was wedging her bags in the small stateroom she was sharing with Lara, the girl whispered that they looked like Vikings. They got to know Birdie over cups of hot tea and stale bagels.

“I'm glad we were running behind schedule, or I never would've gotten your call,” Birdie said. Unlike her husband, who sounded like he was Swedish, Birdie had a flat, mid-western accent.

“I am too. We were a bit desperate. It was so kind of you to bring us,” Diana said. Lara sat very close to her, saying nothing, her arms wrapped around one of the thick polar jackets that Diana had lent her. They'd been on the ship for just over a day and already the temperature had dropped by twenty degrees. Diana didn't know how long they would be staying at Palmer Station, and she packed as much cold weather gear as she and Lara could carry.

“Sam will be so pleased to see you. Is this a surprise visit?” Birdie said. She wore layers of cold-weather clothing, but in another life Diana could see her as a woman who favored crocheted vests and sweaters with cats on them.

“I e-mailed him, so if he doesn't check his account it might be,” Diana said.

“Oh, well. It's nice to have some company, anyhow. Usually it's just Hans and I, unless we get lucky enough to have some passengers aboard,” Birdie smiled and sipped her tea. She had a warm smile, and Diana liked her.

“How long have you been doing this?” Diana asked. She held her warm mug of tea in her hands but didn't drink it. The constant motion of the boat and the faint, wet smell of mildew were doing a number on her stomach, and Diana's head had started hurting before they had cleared the Beagle Channel.

“Over 20 years, during the the summers. Hans used to work on the icebreakers down south during the winters, but now we lead tours closer to home,” Birdie said. She looked at Lara as if she were trying to find traces of Sam on her face.

“You know, I've known your dad for several years now. He's a brilliant man,” Birdie said. Diana guessed that she was probably in her fifties.

“Did he ever mention me?” Lara asked. Her hair was tangled and her eyes were red. Diana had suggested that she get some sleep, but she wouldn't go to bed. Diana had

laid down in their bunk earlier in the day while Lara curled up with her Kindle, but she hadn't been asleep for more than an hour when she'd woken up with her nose bleeding. Lara had been alarmed.

“He did. Sam was in graduate school the first time he came down here, and Hans and I took him out to the station. I mentioned that I grew up in Illinois and he told me that his daughter lived there.”

“He did? Well that's something,” Lara said.

Birdie smiled. “Sam was so excited about his work in those days. He told me all about his research, which had something to do with potential pharmaceutical applications for compounds found in polar algae. He made it sound so interesting.”

Once upon a time, Diana had thought so too.

They arrived at Palmer Station two days later, and Diana had never been so happy to get off a boat in her life. Though it was summer, she and Lara were bundled up in their cold-weather gear; the temperature was in the low thirties, but the constant, driving wind skimming over the barren landscape made it feel much colder.

Lara looked surprised at the sight of Palmer Station, a research facility on Antarctica's northernmost island. When Diana had imagined the place before her first visit, she'd expected makeshift housing built on sheets of ice. In reality, the station looked like a small town, crowded with blue structures and out-buildings and stacks of pods from container ships. Palmer Station—which housed as many as fifty scientists from a variety of fields at any given time—was lively, busy, inhabited. The earth the station stood on was brown and dusted with snow that looked like powdered sugar, and vertical cliffs of ice loomed in the distance. People shouted over the growl of generators while

weather balloons hovered high overhead like great jellyfish suspended in the sky. Palmer Station looked much the same as it had a year earlier, with the notable exception of Sam, who was standing on the dock that jutted out from the solid rock of the island into Hero Inlet.

A team of people in bright orange jackets came forward to tie up the boat. They laughed and greeted Hans and Birdie. Sam, clad in the same type of jacket and insulated khaki pants and a ski hat, stood very still. He looked thinner and apparently hadn't shaved since he'd left home. The look on his face was resigned, but he wasn't looking at Diana, who felt the girl beside her shift and fidget. Lara hadn't said anything in a while, but Diana could feel the tension radiating from her like electricity in the air before a lightning storm.

Sam met them when they came off the boat. He briefly hugged Lara and Diana and said, "So, you're here."

Diana touched the side of his face. The patchy, auburn beard was unfamiliar and she didn't like it. "This is new," she said.

"I forgot my razor," Sam said. He looked like he was going to say something else, but he only gestured for them to follow him. They walked along a path of crunchy frozen dirt that led to a low blue building. Sam swiped a plastic card over a panel and the air-compressed locks released with a gasp. Inside was an anteroom with couches and tables and chairs, and through a doorway Diana saw a small kitchen, the counter lined with hot plates.

"Can I get you anything?" Sam asked. Lara shook her head. Diana sat down and Lara sat beside her. Sam stood for a few moments longer and then took a seat across from them. He looked at Lara.

“You came a long way,” he said. He leaned forward and folded his hands together.

“Eight-thousand miles,” Lara said. It was the first time she'd spoken since they saw Sam.

“You ran away from home,” Sam said. “You dropped out of school.”

Lara shrugged. “I don't live there anymore.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Lara, you can't spend high school in Antarctica. You can't stay here.”

“I'm not going back. I want to stay here with you and Diana,” Lara said.

Diana thought about all of the things that she'd learned about Lara in the past few weeks. She was kind and sweet and funny and so brave, and Sam would never know any of that if he didn't listen.

“Sam, she could stay with us. We have the house in Ushuaia through the fall, and you'll be back soon, anyway, right? Lara can stay with me until then,” Diana said.

Sam pressed his lips together. His eyes were a true gray, the color of concrete, and she'd forgotten how cold they could be.

“There's a boat leaving for Ushuaia in a couple of hours. When you get back, Lara needs to be on the next flight to the U.S.”

Diana shook her head. “That's not fair, Sam. You're responsible for her. And Lara's great. If you had any idea what you're missing out on...”

“You learned that in your three weeks of parenthood?”

“She's better at it than you,” Lara said.

Sam looked from his daughter to Diana. “Oh, that's great. Look, Diana, I'm glad you finally found a friend, but please don't use my daughter to make yourself feel better. That's not how it works.”

“Sam—” Diana said.

He stood up. “No. I can't do this. Lara, I'm sorry. I need to get back to work.”

Lara's face was pale, and zipped up in Diana's polar coat she looked a lot more like the child Diana had seen in those first three pictures.

“This isn't about your work, Sam. It's your life, our life. You'll see when you come home,” Diana said.

Sam looked down and then back at Diana. “I'm not coming back. My work is here, Diana, and it's finally going well. I'm making real progress. I can't quit now. I'm staying until winter, maybe longer. Maybe a lot longer.”

Diana stared at him, at first not understanding. Sam held her gaze and Lara shivered beside her, and then everything became very clear.

Palmer Station was far behind them when Lara walked out on the deck of the supply ship going back to Ushuaia and sat down at Diana's feet. Lara leaned against Diana and curled her long thin legs to her chest and propped her chin on her knees. The boat was sailing with the current and the sky above them was a pearly pink and gray that looked like satin draped above the smooth cobalt ocean. They didn't say anything for a very long time.

Diana thought about her first trip to Antarctica with Sam. It had been a research expedition that had traveled very far south, almost as far as you can go. It was a world of snow and water and ice, and nothing else as far as Diana could see. One night, she was awakened by a violent tearing sound, like a sonic boom, followed by a great rush of air. Beside her, Sam never stirred, and when Diana described the sound to him the next morning, he said the noise was a small piece breaking away from an ice shelf and

slipping into the ocean. He was sorry that he'd missed it. Diana didn't tell him that it was the most terrifying sound she'd ever heard, like the fabric of the world tearing apart. It was sort of how she felt now.

The sunset faded to a deep blue, cloudless sky. The boat guttered along, its engine loud and rusty-sounding. Finally, Lara spoke.

“I'm freezing.”

Diana sighed. “Me too. We should go inside, I guess.”

Neither of them moved. The boat was transporting a group of German astronomers back to Argentina who chattered and smoked on the deck while wearing t-shirts. Diana wasn't looking forward to the prospect of sharing a room with three of them. She just wanted to get back to Ushuaia and crawl into her bed and sleep for a very long time.

“There were so many things I wanted to say to him. And then when he was right in front of me, I couldn't say any of them,” Lara said.

“I know. I'm so sorry, Lara. I know this isn't what you wanted.”

“Did you mean what you said about letting me stay?” Lara asked.

Diana looked down at the top of her dark head. “I did. I do. I mean, I don't know if that's allowed or anything. I'm not sure how it all works.”

Diana was troubled by what Sam said about her using Lara to assuage her own loneliness, mostly because it was true.

“I don't want to go back to Chicago,” Lara said. She scooted around to face Diana. “I can't believe he really doesn't want me.”

Diana sat down on the deck next to Lara, her cold bones aching. “He doesn't want me either.”

“So what do we do now?” Lara asked.

“I'm not really sure. We'll figure it out when we get home, I guess,” Diana said.

Nothing was settled, and yet Diana felt a bright relief—like she'd just reached the end of a long wait, and it was finally her turn.

Above them, millions of stars were closer and brighter than any Diana had ever seen. The air was briny and sharp with cold, and sheets of ice floated on top of the water. Antarctica was behind them, and so was Sam, maybe forever. In a couple of days they would be back in Ushuaia, the end of the world and the beginning of everything. Diana turned her face into the chill as the boat moved ever forward—first north, then east.

## HARD TIME

Joe had ordered his first kit from a hobby magazine dedicated to doll houses, several years earlier. These houses, with their imposing staircases and fine furniture and libraries full of tiny books with actual pages, were a long way from the shoe box his younger sister had when Joe was growing up. This one was a grand old place, an antebellum plantation home with a formal ballroom and Greek-revival Ionic columns.

Joe loved the big houses, populated by little doll people who would never, ever find themselves in lives that had gone so terribly, horribly awry. None of the doll people, ordered from the back pages of Dollhouse Weekly, would ever rob the doll bank, armed with a tiny doll gun, shoot two of the doll tellers, and be sent to doll prison. It just wouldn't happen. Especially not if they had a place like this to call home, a sprawling plantation with a warmly lit kitchen and a working chandelier.

## THE GLASSMAKER

The order came in the usual way. A messenger with a whiskery face arrived at the shop by gondola just as the glassmaker was cooling the fires. The request was written in a calligraphy of blue flame, the color of gaslight, on a worn bit of vellum. The glassmaker read the missive once, twice, before the words vaporized to ash and fell to the floor. The messenger blew the glittering residue from the vellum and rolled it up carefully. He rasped “Tonight,” to the glassmaker and slipped one of his unusually small, pink hands into an unseen pocket deep within his fancy vest. In a movement that was too quick for the old glassmaker's eyes to follow, the messenger produced a small, silk pouch.

The glassmaker had met the messenger's mistress once, many years earlier, when she came to the shop, demanding the impossible from his grandfather, who had thrown up his hands and stormed into the back to relight the fires. The woman's words were clear in the glassmaker's memory, but he could never recall her face, or the sound of her voice. He remembered that she smelled like the hot lavender the glassmaker's mother steamed over the fire and pressed into their bedsheets.

“Why do you ask so much of him?” the young glassmaker had asked. The woman was quiet for so long that he thought she wouldn't answer, but then she did.

“For one night, I can make the world right for one person. I really shouldn't interfere, I know that. But I can, and so I do.”

The memory was a rush of hot lavender in the glassmaker's mind. He stayed with his grandfather that night, and learned what he was supposed to do when the silk pouch landed in his own hands. The glassmaker ushered the messenger back to his awaiting gondola and then got started. He relit the fire and set about gathering his materials. He unwrapped a cane of glass from his finest stock, the best he had ever made. A bit of it had

already gone to make his wife a chandelier for their home, the Palazzo Millefiori, the palace of many-colored glass. There was magic in that glass, he was sure of it, but not the kind that arrived by messenger. Those canes were the glassmaker's own kind of alchemy: the silica, nitrates and arsenic melding into something airless and solid, the glassmaker's deepest wishes blown through the canna da soffio to form something perfect and seamless.

The few times the glassmaker had been entrusted with the fairy's magic, he had been sorely tempted to save a bit for himself for later use. He resisted though, telling himself that only a lesser glassmaker would have a need for the periwinkle-colored dust, which was just the exact same shade as the twilight sky over the Piazza San Marco.

When the fire had gotten so hot that the glassmaker was soaked from his shirtsleeves to his shoes, he threw the powder into the flame. The fire jumped and sparked and the flames were red and blue and green and another color, one that he had only seen on occasions such as this. The glassmaker donned his leather apron and the thick gloves that had been handed down from his grandfather and picked up his tagianti, clippers, and leaned in as close as he dared. He always uttered a tiny prayer at this point, and tonight was no different. He clipped a section of molten glass that was roughly the size of a loaf of bread, divided it, and hurried the halves to his workbench. As he caught the first half of the molten glass to the pontello, an iron rod that kept it from slipping, his focus sharpened.

The glassmaker held the borselle firmly in his gloved hands and began to stretch and mold the glass. The arches would be the tricky part; they were to be no longer than his palm, with narrow soles. The glassmaker clipped and wrought the perfect unbubbled glass until he found a form that suited him, and then he repeated the process.

As the slippers cooled, faintly blue, the glassmaker wondered about the young woman who would wear them, and silently wished her well. He fitted a fine piece of midnight-colored velvet into a wooden box and carefully placed the slippers inside. As the clock chimed and a light knock sounded at the door, the glassmaker threw the last of the blue dust onto the dying embers of the fire and let the heat consume his power to interfere and make the world right, if only for one evening.

## THE UNDERNEATH

“Don't let me up for 2 minutes. I mean it,” said Hector, peering into the water.

“Not a problem, Pop-n-Fresh,” said Nick, Hector's 19-year-old brother. “I heard you the first five times.” Nick put his DS down on the CoolDeck, poked Hector, and dove headfirst into the deep end of the Petrelis family swimming pool. His body was long and graceful, and when Nick broke the surface of the water and brushed away his shaggy hair, dappled gold in the Florida sunlight, to Hector it looked as if he had been born there, like the birth of Venus re-imagined by Abercrombie & Fitch.

Grinning, Nick stood in the middle of the pool, his skin tan and his eyes very, very green, while Hector, who more closely resembled one of their mother's pale, wistful Lladro figurines, hesitated at the edge, his toes curled over the deck. Nick slapped his open palms against the water. The noise he made profoundly irritated Hector.

“You coming in, Beej?” Nick asked Hector's best friend, Bijal Bannerjee, who had been charged with minding the bright yellow stopwatch.

Bijal shook her head, and Hector noticed that her long dark hair had a slightly reddish cast in the sunlight. She had spent the last several minutes scrutinizing a diagram of how to perform CPR. She printed it off Google. Just in case.

“I still say that you should start with a shorter amount of time. Two minutes is way too long,” said Bijal.

“Two minutes is nothing. It's not even a commercial break. I've been practicing.” Hector swung his arms at his sides and poised himself to jump into the pool, but then changed his mind and walked to the steps at the shallow end. A shiver ran across his shoulders. It was three days into the new year, the temperature hovered around 80 degrees and the pool water was only marginally cooler. Hector edged into the pool, one

step at a time, paddled over to Nick and stood up in the chest-deep water, resenting each of the three inches that separated the top of his brother's head from his own.

“If you start to drown, give us a signal,” said Bijal. She waved her arms.

“Flail,” said Nick.

“Right. Don't start the clock until he's standing on my back.”

Hector pulled his neon-blue goggles over his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to fill his nose and mouth and lungs simultaneously. He eased himself under, his plan running through his head the way a news ticker crawled across the television screen: just don't breathe.

## **00.00**

Hector struggled to get to the bottom of the pool, full of air as he was, until Nick put one of his over-sized feet on Hector's left shoulder blade and eased him down. Hector folded his arms under his chest and rested his hands on his chin so that he wouldn't be tempted to move. If he didn't succeed this time, he never would. A moment later, Nick's other foot came to rest somewhere in the neighborhood of Hector's right kidney, pinning him to the floor, and he knew the clock was starting. On the bottom of the pool, practically the only part of the house that had remained untouched during the renovation, was a mosaic of an ibis, and Hector could feel his ribs pressed against the white glass tiles.

## **11.60**

Hector wondered how long he had been under. Thirty seconds, maybe more. There really was nothing to it. The water felt nice against his skin. Refreshing, even.

Hector's mom, Hannah Petrelis, first reminded him about the Greek Orthodox Epiphany celebration a little over a month earlier, right after Thanksgiving. Hector hadn't

thought they would bother keeping up appearances this year. The fact that Hannah and Pete Petrelis were proceeding as they normally would encouraged Hector, and now he was more determined than ever to see the event go smoothly. Five generations of Petrelis's had participated in the ceremony, which takes place at dawn every year on January 6 in a tiny inlet on the opposite side of New Port Noelle, just across the bayou from the Petrelis home. During Epiphany, young men declare their faith and commemorate the holy baptism by diving into the black harbor and searching for a large gold cross cast into the water by a priest. The one who retrieves the cross receives a blessing from the priest, who then goes to the winner's home and blesses it also with the now-holy water from the harbor. It was one of the most important days of the year for the Greeks, and the now-famous ritual attracted a lot of local attention. Though the holiday itself was properly known as the Feast of Theophany, Hector believed that the church used its less formal name to make for jazzier headlines: "Epiphany in New Port Noelle" and "Locals Experience Epiphany."

The tradition had persisted in the town of New Port Noelle, known to the locals as New Port Nowhere, since the turn of the century, when the first Greeks made modest fortunes diving for sponges in the Gulf of Mexico. Like all good traditions, there was no shortage of local lore surrounding it. Once every couple of decades or so, someone died, usually from a freak accident or an ill-timed seizure. There were always injuries: sprains and bumps and bruises; fingers and palms sliced open by barnacles and rusted crab traps; flesh laid bare in the burning, brackish water; sea lice and jelly fish stings. In recent memory, a young man named Theo Savopoulous had emerged from the water, dripping and empty-handed, with dozens of shimmering, thumb-print-sized blue-button jellyfish clinging to his skin, their tentacles anchored into his flesh. Theo's brother, Anthony,

would be competing in this year's dive, and Hector happened to know that the younger Savopoulos had asthma.

When Hannah Petrelis suggested that Hector dive for the cross this year, his first instinct was to refuse. He had several objections, all of them sound. The first, of course, was that he really didn't want to die. Death wasn't a frequent occurrence during the cross-diving competition, but it *did* happen, and because it could happen, Hector believed that it would. So he practiced.

Hector's second objection was that, based on prior performance, he clearly wasn't the Petrelis man for the job. Having been bested by Nick at every activity from Little League baseball to Guitar Hero, Hector was the first one to nominate his brother for the task. Even Nick's twin sister, Amara, the reigning family champion at air hockey, Wii tennis and Dance Dance Revolution, would have been a much better choice. Unfortunately, Nick was too old, and the Petrelis cousin next in line after Hector wouldn't be old enough to participate in the event for another two years, and it was difficult to predict what would be left of the Petrelis family by then.

## **21.20**

Hector allowed a thin stream of air bubbles to escape from his nose. Nick's feet were firmly in his back, and Hector didn't think that he could move even if he wanted to. He wondered what Nick and Bijal were talking about. He could hear their voices, a little, above the quiet gulp of the pool filter. Hector thought that Bijal, who was small and dark like his mother, looked very nice today, and for the millionth time thanked the universe that she wasn't Nick's type. He liked tall blonds like Gemma Sweeney, Pete Petrelis's jogging buddy. Nick was a lot like his dad that way.

Hector tried to shift his body, and proved his theory that he couldn't move to be true. He had to be approaching the one-minute mark. He was maybe past it. When Hector had told Nick that he wanted to dive for the cross, Nick said that every year the winner was the guy who could hold his breath the longest. While the others came up gasping for air and then went back down, the winner was the one who found the cross on the first try. "All you have to do is hold your breath longer than anybody else," Nick said sagely, "Figure that out, and you're golden."

The third reason for Hector's reluctance to participate in the Epiphany dive was the one that would hurt his mother the most were Hector to voice his objections aloud: the Petrelis family, pillars of the Greek orthodox community, wasn't Greek. Not really. Not a single drop of Greek blood ran in any of their veins. This nonsense had started three generations earlier when Hector's great-grandparents on his father's side, the Petrils, immigrated from Albania. Finding no community of their own, the Petrils changed their name and made their home among the Greek sponge divers in Tarpon Springs, a few miles south of New Port Noelle.

His mother's grandparents had virtually the same story, though they were Turkish. Hector's great-grandmother, Ayse, had lived long enough to tell him her stories about her childhood spent on the banks of the Bosphorus. As a result of the way his great-grandparents wholly embraced their new community, Hector had spent his entire incense-choked life eating overcooked, over-seasoned lamb and honeyed bricks of baklava. It was also the reason why Nick's feet were pinning Hector to the bottom of the pool when he was running out of air.

**32.49**

Hector knew that he had to be getting close. He could still hear Nick and Bijal talking. He heard his best friend laugh and felt a stab of annoyance. Nick wasn't funny. Bijal was way too smart to laugh at one of Nick's dumb jokes. She was the brightest one in their high school class. She was probably just being polite. The thought reassured Hector. He exhaled a little more and listened to the sound of bubbles bursting in the water.

They had grown up together, Hector and Bijal. They had carpooled together, studied together, commiserated together. Her parents, Dr. & Dr. Bannerjee, were strict and very into being Hindu. The doctors approved of the Petrelis's devotion to their faith. They liked Hector, and he and Bijal had spent many afternoons at his house or hers, consoling themselves with spanokopita and tzatziki, curry and naan. One day soon, Hector would have to tell Bijal that he sort of loved her.

Hector felt the weight of the water now, pushing against him. Bijal was the only one who knew the true extent of his terror, and his primary reason for not wanting to dive. Hector had never liked water. The pool, with the bleachy, chlorine smell that burned his throat and eyes, was bad enough. He'd had nightmares about it for years; he'd seen a special on 20/20 called A Killer in Your Own Back Yard, or something like that, about all of the ways you could die in and around the family pool. Slip off the diving board at just the right angle, sever your cervical spine, and drown. Hit your head on the concrete wall while swimming laps underwater, and drown. Forget to apply liberal amounts of sunscreen, get third degree burns, have an infection set in, and die. Chemical burns from overzealous chlorination. Flesh-eating bacteria. Melanoma. Get sucked into the drain at the bottom of the pool and have your internal organs ripped from various orifices.

Unlikely, he knew, but tell that to the 14 people who were disemboweled every year.

The pool, however, was like a warm bath compared to the real water, out there, less than 20 feet from where Hector was struggling to keep his mouth closed on the bottom of the pool. The Petrelis family home was built four feet above sea level on Noelle Bayou, and the three story stucco house rose like a leviathan on the breakwater where the silty black current of the Pithlachascottee River bled into the briny green Gulf of Mexico. The bayou was vast and bleak, guarded by a snarl of skeletal mangroves on two sides. The mangroves were unattractive in the daytime and menacing at night, but illegal to cut down for fear of erosion. Hector and Bijal spent hours in those trees as children, testing branches and building kingdoms. One day, when they were 10, he and Bijal were about halfway through constructing a fort when Hector fell through the branches and into a swampy wetness that was neither land nor water, disturbing a wriggling black nest of salt marsh snakes. Black water. Black snakes. The dangers in the pool were medieval, but those snakes were the stuff of nightmares.

#### **45.00**

Hector was out of air. Something trembled deep in his chest and he had to pinch his fingers over his nose to keep from inhaling the chlorinated water, which Hannah Petrelis color-treated to make it look “a little bluer.” A little bit of water went up his nose anyway and Hector felt a burning spasm in his throat and behind his eyes. It had been so long since he had been underwater that he had forgotten how much that hurt. The spasm passed and Hector clamped his fingers tighter and waited for Nick to move his feet.

It was Wednesday, right between breakfast and lunch, and his mother would be on the third floor, wiping down all of the baseboards. They had a maid now, twice a week, but there were some things that Hannah preferred to do herself, like scrubbing the grout

in the bathrooms and pulling out the refrigerator to capture the dust bunnies that set off Hector's allergies. She also gave the entire house a thorough once-over with bleach and Windex and Soft-Scrub on the days before the cleaning lady came, so that she wouldn't think that the Petrelis family was messy.

Everyone worked to keep the house clean, even Amara. It was brand-new, built on the site of the ranch-style home that Hector had lived in since he was a few months old. Pete, Hannah, Hector and Nick loved the house, and the way that it rose majestically above the water, bright-white and monstrous, like a Greek villa on steroids. An image flashed through Hector's mind. It was right after the flood, when the plans were drawn up for the new house. At three stories and close to 7000 square feet, it was more than three times the size of the old house. Hannah pressed her hands onto the blueprints, her eyes gleaming. "Nick and Amara will never bother you again, Hector. We could all probably go weeks in this place without seeing each other."

Like everyone else in the family, Hector had hoped that the house would save them. He remembered wondering, right after the freak storm had ravaged several little towns along the coast the day after Christmas the previous year, when everything was wet and his feet were bloody from stepping on carpet tacks, if the No-Name Storm had hit New Port Nowhere solely for his family's salvation. Before the storm, his parents talked about separating, about papers being signed and the equitable division of assets. Pete grew distant, retreating to the small den every evening when he came home from the marina to play Halo with Nick, his eyes glazed, while Hannah grew desperate, baking in excess and organizing rigidly enforced family fun days that were anything but. It was the year Amara became mean.

**1:02:45**

Hector really didn't have any air. The urge to inhale, to gasp, was overwhelming. He felt a popping sensation in his ears and the feeling of something in his chest being doubled over. His throat expanded and contracted, and there was nothing in the whole world he wanted so much as to just open his mouth. Why wasn't Nick moving yet? Hector thought about breathing in the water, about what a relief it would be to give in to reflex. He felt the weight of evolution urging him to do what had come naturally for a hundred million years. Just breathe.

Like many of their neighbors, Pete had prepared well for the disaster, loading up on insurance policies and supplemental plans that paid big, just in case. That, coupled with government disaster aid, dispensed freely for the purpose of structure fortification, made for a big payday for many local residents. In a matter of months the bare bones of gigantic new constructions had eaten up the charming little neighborhood that Hector had grown up in. The tiny streets were now lined with McMansions and the residents had all become fluent in the strange new language of temperature-stable wine storage and perimeter surveillance.

Things were better for Hector's parents when the construction of the home they always wanted was underway. The house had had a soothing effect on Pete and Hannah, and during their intense discussions about wainscoting and paint samples and load-bearing walls, they found common ground. It seemed to Hector that, for the first time in many years, they had something to talk about other than their children. The house was a shared interest, a passion. They had something now that couldn't be divided; to divest themselves of each other would mean to vacate their dream home and cede the proceeds to lawyers. The price was simply too high. It was decided without anyone ever knowing:

Hannah could plan parties and shop, judge others and be married, and Pete could have Gemma Sweeney and a commercial gas grill, his catamaran, *Sweet Hannah*, and his good name. And no one could say a bad word about any of them.

Oddly, Hector wasn't bothered by his parent's unspoken understanding, even if it was only prolonging the inevitable. They were faking it, all of them, and Hector would too. He would play the Greek who wasn't, on the misnamed holiday, diving into water that was far too valuable to be holy. If it came to divorce, if they fought, they would all lose. Hector didn't want their beautiful home to be broken, sold, liquidated. He didn't want his mother to turn into a zoned-out, addled first wife whose forehead was packed with Botox and whose overpriced handbag rattled with pills. Pete, likewise, would do nothing good with that kind of freedom. No, the Petrelis family would be visible at this event, as they had been for five generations. Their devotion would be noted.

Amara was the sole dissenter. Like Hector and Nick, she had been puzzled by their father's sudden interest in jogging, and all of the corporate meetings that took Pete out on the boats that docked at the marina the Petrelis family had owned since the days of shrimping and sponge diving. Amara had been angry for a long time, and as the shape of the Petrelis home changed, so did she. Amara was the only one who didn't see the house as their salvation, and her refusal to greet it as such had angered everyone. Hector and Nick had fallen on either side of the fault line: Nick sided with Pete, and Hector with Hannah. Amara despised them all.

Hector didn't know where his sister was right now. Amara didn't know that her brother wasn't breathing. Hector had tried to scare Amara once, which was a mistake. If she saw him now, at the bottom of the pool, facing his demons and losing, she might've

laughed. Amara wasn't afraid of the water. Amara wasn't afraid of anything. Especially Hector's dire warnings:

“They might break up if you keep acting this way,” Hector said one morning after Amara had picked a particularly nasty fight with Hannah. Pete was out jogging, again, and Amara had said something that simply couldn't be uttered within the Petrelis family's fragile house of cards. Hannah retreated to her new cedar sauna, as she often did, promising to take Amara shopping if she would *just please shut up*. Amara wasn't as high-minded as she liked to think and she never turned down a peace summit at Nordstrom, not even during her brief phase as a socialist, when she slung her Prada messenger bag over her Che Guevara t-shirt without a hint of irony.

Amara was helping Hector with the extra-breakable dishes, the new ones that were too fragile for the industrial-grade machine. She washed, he dried. The kitchen faced the water, and the view was fit for stained glass.

“They should,” Amara said, her metallic black fingernails scraping a price sticker from some small tchotchkes their mother had found at one of the antique stores she kept in business. Amara brushed the sticker from her fingertips and handed Hector a tiny porcelain elephant. “They won't, though.”

“They might,” Hector insisted.

“And risk losing this place?” Amara said, raising an eyebrow. “Don't bet on it.”

### **1:17:34**

Hector was dying. He was sure of it. He was trying to move, to flail, but he couldn't. His hands were on his mouth, his ears, his nose, trying to keep the water out. His eyes hurt and something black was seeping into his irises. He blinked and saw purple through his blue goggles, into the blue water. He twisted like one of the black snakes in

the mangroves and wondered why Nick was trying to kill him. Would he really do that in front of Bijal? Would he then drown her too? Or was she in on it?

Things stopped making sense. Hector blinked again and decided that his eyes were leaking rage. He shouldn't be here. He dreaded water. He wasn't Greek. He hated Pete for falling out of love with Hannah. He hated Hannah for thinking that heated tiles and Sub-Zero appliances were any match for the bouncy jogger Gemma Sweeney, with her thick blond pony-tail and bright-pink UnderArmor. He hated Amara for seeing everything so clearly, and for forsaking all of them so completely. He hated the Greeks for dreaming up such a stupid tradition in the first place. And he really hated Nick, whose clown feet were pressing into his ribcage as firmly as ever. Hector should have known better than to agree, to *insist* on the perpetuation of the lie that would force them all together at dawn on Sunday morning, clamoring for one more blessing as Hector hurled himself into the black water in the pursuit of something shiny and bright. For that, he hated himself.

### **01:41:31**

Hector felt his eyeballs expand and contract and something inside of his ears pulsate. His lungs seemed to fill his chest and throat, and his panicking heart was somewhere outside of his body entirely. His brother's feet were still firmly planted and purplish drops from his eyes splotched his goggles. Tears? No. Then he remembered the way that blood vessels popped when people suffocated.

Without thinking about it, Hector released his hands from his nose and mouth and inhaled deeply. Water rushed inside of him: up his nose and down his throat, filling his stomach and his lungs. It burned. For a second, relief, then terror. He was still dying. He tried to move, to wave his arms, but it was like they didn't belong to him anymore. Hector

twisted his neck from one side to the other, his cheeks scraping the tiles on the bottom of the pool. The water possessed Hector and owned him; it saved him and destroyed him.

He really hoped that Bijal understood that diagram.

Hector's life did not flash before his eyes. There was one image, an absurd moment during the fireworks show at the Petrelis's New Year's Eve party, when a blaze of sparkling light cascaded over the bayou, and Hector watched himself standing on the balcony with his family and Bijal. He saw six people standing together, smiling and toasting and cheering as their world burned.

Blackness drifted over Hector so quickly. He thought that he felt Nick finally move, releasing him and then pulling him to the surface, but he couldn't be sure.

## CHECK AND TURN

Six months after her last day in Miami, 24-year-old Lila Davis found herself standing at the gravel-lined edge of the polo fields in the Village of Wellington, her parents' adopted hometown 90 minutes north and a world away from Miami. For the first time since that awful night in Little Havana, Lila didn't know what she was doing there. It was just after dawn in early April and the Florida sky was watery gold. The scene in front of Lila was pastoral and indisputably lovely, the kind of beauty you couldn't argue with, like something out of an ad in a glossy over-sized magazine, perfectly lit.

Wellington was the home of the Winter Equestrian Festival, the largest and longest horse show in the world. The series of competitions in dressage and hunter/jumper categories coincided with the winter high-goal polo season hosted at The International Polo Club Palm Beach (IPC). During the months of January-April, for the equestrian world Wellington was the only place to be. Lila shifted in her spot at the edge of the field, uncomfortable in her outfit, but the dress code at IPC was explicit: breeches and boots paired with a crisp white polo shirt that her mom had ironed the night before. Somehow, Lila doubted that she made the ensemble look as effortlessly chic as the players who were practicing out on the field. She tried to pick out Teddy Townsend, the man she was there to see, but the action on the enormous field made it difficult to tell the players apart.

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No one in the Davis family had supported Lila's move to Miami after college. The city itself didn't seem to want her very much. The heat in the crowded city was relentless, blistering her feet through the thin soles of her flip-flops. The traffic that jammed the 10-

lane highway and bottle-necked onto single-lane, one-way streets was awful, and all of the voices Lila heard were loud and foreign and insistent. For the first time, her life wasn't easy. Lila paid bills and lost keys, drank too much and slept with inappropriate men. She lost hours in galleries and museums on Lincoln Road in the art district, and had drinks in fancy hotels like The Delano just off Ocean Drive. On her days off from her entry-level job at an art gallery in one of the bright-pink Art Deco buildings that rose off Collins Avenue like an enormous tropical flower, Lila went to the beach. She loved watching all of the people on South Beach, and walking in the hot sand as the golden blue waves fizzed on the shore like champagne and her phone sent her parents' calls to voice mail. In those days, Lila never seemed to have enough time, or money, or sense, and she had never been happier.

Alejandro Oswaldo, a wet foot/dry foot exiled Cuban artist, was Lila's first friend in Miami, and he became much more than that. They met at a gallery opening where Lila was charged with organizing a pastry table with stale petit fours and burnt-tasting cafe con leche after the caterer flaked out, sending Lila's boss into a tailspin. It was a step-up from her usual duties of taking messages and line-editing press releases, but still about as mundane as it got on the exciting Miami art scene. The gallery was open to the public, and the exhibit was a series of wide-open rooms. Everyone in the gallery looked serious and deeply moved as they took in the gray and black lines of color tripping across the gallery walls like bleeps of Morse code, and Lila mimicked their expressions as she arranged little cakes iced with fondant that peeled away like human skin on white paper doilies. She didn't notice Alejandro until he was standing right in front of her.

“You don't get it, do you?” Alejandro had asked. He had luminous dark eyes and a thin smile, and Lila noticed specks of silvery glitter caught in his eyebrows.

“It's an excellent show,” Lila said, “Great turnout. Coffee?”

Alejandro shook his head and walked behind the refreshment stand and took her hand. Lila looked at him, startled, but didn't protest as he led her into one of the rooms. She looked around to see if her boss was watching, but the crowd was a sea of indistinguishable faces. He stood Lila in front of the wall, his hands on her shoulders.

“What do you see?”

“Lines. Dots. I don't know.”

“Look closer.”

Lila bit the inside of her cheek and felt a spark of irritation. She needed to get back to her table. “Still nothing. Sorry.”

Alejandro smiled at Lila. “That's too bad.”

“Wait. What do *you* see on that wall?”

Alejandro looked from Lila to the wall and back. “I see beauty. I see space for the world and everyone in it and everything else. I see art. I see life. I see you.”

Of course she fell in love with him. It seemed likely. He was waiting outside for her when she left the gallery, and he took her to the beach. It was well after midnight, not that that meant anything in Miami, and as they sat on the cool sand under the very black, starless sky eating gelato, Alejandro told Lila the first of many stories. It was about his mother, whom Lila would never meet, the first Cuban Avon lady in Little Havana.

Alejandro said that she inspired him to become an artist. His medium was cosmetics: powdered bronzer the color of sun-worshippers who baked on South Beach, palettes of eye shadow in glittering hues like cerulean and stardust, puffs of shimmer powder, ragged kisses in lipstick the color of sunset. His canvases were cotton bedsheets that lined the walls of his studio in Little Havana, a neighborhood that Lila had been told to avoid.

Lila and Alejandro spent many nights together after that. After work, she took the train to his studio just off Calle Ocho, and they would sit on the floor eating sweet empanadas and drinking bitter Cuban coffee. He didn't sell many paintings, but Lila didn't care. When they laid in bed at night, Alejandro told her stories—about himself, about his world. Once, he was the bastard son of a diplomat; then, he was a shimmering revolutionary who built kingdoms out of lip gloss and nail lacquer by day, and by night planned coups of his native land. He was a rebel, a pirate, an alchemist who liquified gold into smooth Cuban rum and smuggled it north in U-boats commandeered from another century. His words, like his paintings, were beautiful and bright like slicks of silvery moonlight over white cotton, and Lila loved him.

Lila never told anyone in her family about Alejandro. It seemed odd now, that the people who had loved Lila all her life didn't understand that what happened that night in Little Havana changed her, completely. Looking back, Lila realized the reason that she hadn't been open about her relationship was that she liked the fact that Alejandro was hers, and hers alone. Lila envied the girl she used to be, the one who was having the time of her life in Miami, thinking that she was living on the edge of something dangerous and beautiful. She remembered feeling daring, bulletproof, like she was dancing across a tightrope with no spotter and no net. The thought of having a secret lover, an artist, no less, that she could keep all to herself thrilled Lila. She loved the hot, quiet darkness, the stillness of Little Havana after midnight. Lila was a stranger in that world: an interloper, a spy. Alejandro came alive at night, and that's when Lila loved him the most. She laughed her way to his doorstep every night smelling like ouzo and crushed porcelain after having a drink at a Greek bar on the beach where patrons danced on tables and dropped plates on the floor. She fell into his glittering arms, onto his twisted sheets that puffed up clouds of

blush and shadow, breathless and ecstatic. The memories were bittersweet. Yes, Lila envied that girl, but not nearly as much as she pitied her.

In those days, Lila loved living in Miami because it made her feel alive and brave. She felt like she owned the streets, and that was so different from what she was used to, nothing at all like her very careful upbringing. Hers were the parents who hovered, who drove her to school themselves because school buses didn't have seat belts, who stayed awake at night worrying that sexual predators might move into the neighborhood and drove stakes into their lawns advising against it. Their words were drilled into Lila's head before she was old enough to leave their arms: don't talk to strangers, or homeless people, or anyone; lock your windows, your doors; don't eat Halloween candy; don't drive late at night. Don't ever let your assailant take you to a second location, because no one survives that. Kick, bite, scratch, elbow, scream and run. Run for your life. Her parents' caution ran in Lila's veins, and she also absorbed their fear, and a deep, ancient knowledge that the world wasn't safe.

But she loved being with Alejandro, and late one night when Alejandro offered to drive her home so that she wouldn't have to take the train, which circled the city like a jewel-toned lariat, they walked to his car parked not far from the gallery, when a dark man stepped out of the shadows and said something in Spanish. Lila thought that he was asking for directions until she saw the stricken look on Alejandro's face and the knife in the stranger's hand. It was as though a veil suddenly lifted and Lila saw how ugly and awful the world was, and she was horrified that her parents had been right. Lila's heart broke as the stranger stabbed Alejandro in the throat once, twice, before her lover's body fell to the dirty, broken pavement. Lila would never forget the sound of the knife tearing his flesh, wet and final. When the stranger, a teenager under the guttering street lamp,

turned to Lila, yelling in Spanish and pointing the knife in the general area of her kidney, she pressed the button on the taser she didn't remember reaching for and watched as the two tiny wires flew into the boy's chest and knocked him to the ground.

The year Lila announced her plan to move to Miami, she found the taser nestled into her Easter basket alongside a can of pepper spray and a chocolate bunny. Her father explained to her that the purpose of the device was to give herself enough time to run away, but even as she shocked the young man again while she dialed 911 and told the police to come, quickly, she knew that she wasn't going anywhere. Alejandro was gone, fallen at her side, his eyes open and glazed. When she placed her hand on his chest, the only movement was the trembling of her own fingers. The sidewalk was painted in his blood. She pressed the button again. The boy looked like he was having a seizure, writhing in agony, and yelling something that sounded an awful lot like “you crazy bitch.” Lila thought about the paintings that would never be finished and the stories that would never again be whispered in her ear, and she pressed the button yet again. The tiny wires sizzled against the boy's flesh, and when Lila's parents' instructions echoed in her ears, telling her to run, she felt the bitter laugh of the heartbroken rise in her chest.

Lila could already hear the sirens when she got out her Spitfire pepper spray, walked over to the boy, and emptied it into his eyes until the small black canister was hissing air. He jerked on the ground, screaming, truly screaming. Lila forgot all about the knife that killed Alejandro until she felt it slice through her jeans. When she looked down, it was buried in her left leg, and it was her own blood coloring the pavement.

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Lila did not resist when her family came to Miami, en masse, to bring her home with them to Wellington. Her angry mother demanded drugs to prevent tetanus, HIV and hepatitis, and when the doctor had the nerve to describe the puncture in Lila's thigh as a "flesh wound," her father threatened to have him fired. Lila's sister packed up her apartment and told Lila that she sent a tasteful bouquet of birds of paradise to "your friend's funeral." It all happened very quickly, and Lila never once protested.

Wellington was a good place for Lila to recover from the horrifying incident; everyone said so. The International Polo Club was less than a mile from the Davis home in The Grand Regatta, "a gated community for luxury living." Their home was large and airy, with all the amenities, and Lila had a nice life there, a safe life. It was a happy life, too. Her parents were healthy and they loved each other. They deserved their success, and they enjoyed sharing it with their children. Lila was surrounded by friends and family, and there were wonderful parties to go to and spectacular things to see. Tommy Lee Jones was an avid polo player and even had his own team, San Saba. Bruce Springsteen's daughter competed on the dressage circuit, as did Mayor Bloomberg's. Lila never wanted for anything.

The sheer perfection of the village was astonishing. Everything seemed new, from the organic and gourmet grocery stores to the private health clubs and day spas. The roads were wide and every green space was beautifully landscaped. All of the neighborhoods were gated and monitored and so very safe. There was no real crime. When Lila saw the scandalous front page of the local paper exposing a store in the Mall at Wellington Green for purveying counterfeit Ed Hardy t-shirts, she brushed her fingers against the silvery pink scar on her leg and thought about how everyone she knew talked

about how lucky she was, how fortunate. She had seen the real world, and survived. At least, that's what they said.

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And so she moved in—temporarily—with her parents, who had been practicing real estate since Lila left their home on the Gulf Coast for college. It shortly became apparent to Lila that polo was tantamount to religion in the odd little town where it wasn't uncommon for people to ride their horses to the bank and gated communities had names like Equus. Before she attended her first match, Lila assumed that it totally wouldn't be her scene; she expected it to be stuffy and elitist, full of rich old white men and sour-looking women wearing hats. Though she wasn't entirely mistaken, there was a lot more to it than that. The fans were passionate, screaming, holding banners that said “*FANTASTIQUE*” after a solid play was made by one of their heroes. Then there were the traditions that graced the pages of *People & Ponies*, the magazine that Lila worked for: fancy catered tailgate parties sponsored by companies like Bulova and Cartier, champagne brought to the field via helicopter after the fourth chukker, which was sort of like halftime, enthusiasts slicing the necks of chilled magnums of Moët with gleaming sabers, while others ruined their shoes in the divot stomp.

As Lila watched the practice on the field, a player hit the small, plastic polo ball with his mallet as his horse raced by at a full gallop. The ball was smashed to pieces, and one of the grooms watching the match from the sidelines ran out to the field and put another ball into play. All four of the polo players on the TeddyTown team were outfitted in white pants and white polo jerseys with thick blue-and-gold lettering, as well as heavy

leather protective gear and helmets. Three of the men were South American, and Lila knew they were the pros. Many polo teams that played in the high-goal tournaments consisted of three very strong players, the best in the world, and an amateur player who was sometimes also the team owner. The strength of the player was indicated by his or her handicap, assigned by a regulation committee. The team handicap in high-goal polo is 26. Superstars like Adolfo Cambiaso have 10-goal handicaps, though most players average 4-8. Then there were players like Teddy Townsend, who ranked (A) for amateur and averaged about one goal per match.

Astride his galloping black horse, Lila thought that Teddy Townsend, the only pale person on the field, looked anything but amateur. As she watched, Teddy rose up from his horse, which was mid-sprint across the pitch that spanned the length of three football fields, and executed a complicated-looking maneuver in which his forearm seemed to wind up at the elbow and spin 360 degrees, *backward*, to smash his wooden mallet against the polo ball. As the 1100-lb. horses galloped across the field, it was easy to see why it needed to be so large. The horses and riders raced from one end of the pitch to the other and back again, the horses' hooves and the riders' mallets kicking up sprays of dirt and grass all the way. The sound of hooves heavy on the grass and horses slamming into each other, punctuated by shouts in English and Castilian, was exciting, vital. Even the seasoned grooms lining the edge of the field waiting with water and fresh mounts watched the rapid plays with interest. With their dark eyes and glowing golden skin sheened with sweat in the early morning light, the South Americans reminded Lila of a man she used to know.

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“You wrote that story, 'The Torte of Kings,' about the dessert bar at The Player's Club, right? My friend Eli owns that place. He's going to get it framed,” Teddy Townsend said.

Lila smiled even as her insides twisted. She didn't like the idea of people reading her articles, which just seemed to get in the way of the shiny advertisements that papered *People & Ponies*, much less recognizing her as the writer.

Teddy shook Lila's hand with both of his, one holding her hand and the other her forearm. His palms were rough and his handshake was firm. In person, Theodore “Teddy” Townsend, a prominent businessman, wasn't what Lila had anticipated at all. She had seen him from a distance a month earlier, when he spent half a million dollars on two Lusitano horses at an auction, but up close, he was different. He had the presence of Steve McQueen, and there was a depth to his blue-gray eyes that didn't come across in photographs.

“It was a good story,” Teddy continued. He was looking at Lila in a way that made her feel like he had seen her face before and was trying to place her.

“It was a good dessert,” Lila said.

Teddy laughed and took off his helmet and protective gear and handed them to a waiting groom. Another groom led two fresh horses that hadn't been played during the practice up to Teddy and Lila. Lila immediately recognized the larger horse, coal black with a star on its forehead, as Beauregard, one of the most famous horses in Wellington. His father, Sgt. Pepper, was an icon, earning a six-page memorial in *People & Ponies* and the front page of *The Palm Beach Post* when he died. The horse had broken his leg during a polo match years earlier in a fall that nearly killed his rider, but his devastated owner couldn't bear to see him euthanized, so he had the leg replaced with a prosthesis. It was

the end of Sgt. Pepper's polo career, but he spent his remaining years as a beloved ambassador to local elementary schools and children's charities. Teddy noticed Lila looking at Beauregard, who Teddy rode in every match.

“He's going to play in the final chukker on Sunday. We're going to take home the trophy this year.”

The match on Sunday was a big one, and Lila knew that the tranquility that now reigned at the International Polo Club would be short-lived. The club comprised two primary, regulation high-goal polo fields and several smaller practice fields. The whole thing, including the towering, Greek-revival grandstands, was the property of IPC, which hosted the three most prestigious high-goal polo tournaments in the world. The Standford final was on Sunday, and TeddyTown would be playing against rivals Black Watch, New Bridge/La Dolfina, and Pony Express for a chance at the Cup. It was a very big deal in Wellington, which swelled in population during the Winter Equestrian Festival. The stands and the sidelines would be packed on Sunday, but on this morning it seemed like the village was nearly silent.

Lila knew that Beauregard was one of at least seven horses that Teddy would be riding on Sunday. Polo ponies could maintain speeds of up to 35 mph for short bursts of time, which was why each chukker was only seven minutes long and then the horses were switched out. Each player brought a string of seven or eight ponies to every match, one for each chukker and a spare, and the individual ponies, bred for optimum performance, represented years of training and expense. Since this was a morning practice session, each player only had a few horses with him. The rest of TeddyTown's horses, and Lila guessed there were about forty of them, were back at the Townsend Stable, which Teddy famously referred to as “The Barn.” The enormous complex situated on the Townsend

estate was one of the most state-of-the-art facilities in Wellington, boasting cutting-edge technology, as well as on-site vets, a nutritionist for the horses, countless grooms, and an equine massage therapist. Looking at Beauregard, Lila spoke.

“He's a beautiful horse.” The early morning sunlight played on the horse's muscles and his coat gleamed. Above his hooves, his legs were bound in deep blue tape and his tail and mane were tightly wound with gold ribbon. The smaller black horse standing next to Beauregard nickered softly and Lila felt the urge to pet her. She had never been much of a rider, because her parents hadn't encouraged it. Or any sports, for that matter.

“Who's his friend?” Lila asked, gesturing to the smaller horse.

“That's Lucy in the Sky, his sister. She's retired now, but she still likes to come out to the pitch and keep us company. She's extremely gentle; I thought you could ride her today.”

Lila looked up at Teddy startled. “What?”

Teddy grinned as he hopped up on Beauregard and gestured for Lila to do the same. “Most people who come to polo on Sundays never get the chance to ride on this field. They come to Wellington to see the best polo in the world and never get the true experience,” he said.

“It's really beautiful out here,” Lila said. She could feel the heat of the morning on her hair, and the world smelled like grass and horses and sunlight. “Very peaceful. How long have you been playing polo?”

“Nine years last week,” Teddy said immediately. He gave Lila a smile that was almost apologetic. “Have you ever played?”

Lila shook her head. “I haven't. I can't. I was born with one kidney-”

“Unilateral renal agenesis,” Teddy said.

Lila looked at him in surprise. She was certain that Teddy didn't have the condition, or he wouldn't be playing a sport as rough as polo. It was a truly brutal game. During the season, the injury rate for players was 100%. It was the most dangerous sport outside of stock car racing, with lots of broken collarbones, arms, legs and jaws. Severe accidents sometimes left riders with "catastrophic injuries," and death wasn't unheard of. The past season in Wellington had been particularly deadly, with two players getting killed during practices and a high-ranked female polo player sustaining fatal injuries during a match.

"My parents were farmers, back in Texas. They really wanted me to go to college and be a doctor, and I was pre-med at the state university. I worked nights as an assistant at a hospital to put myself through school. I saw a case of that once; a man came in with one kidney. The doctor warned him not to play football or anything, but other than that said he would be fine."

"Try telling my parents that. It scared the hell out of them. They made everyone in our family see if they were a donor match. I have a third cousin in Ohio who's pretty close."

Teddy laughed. "So no polo for you."

"I'm afraid not. You've been in Wellington for nine years?"

"Since the first anniversary of my wife's death. Olivia was about your age when we met. Everyone thought she was too young for me, and I always worried about leaving her alone when I died. Fate had fun with that one."

Teddy's tone was bitter. Lila didn't know what to say, so she just listened. The horses kept walking, not needing any direction, and Lila felt soothed by Lucy's steady breathing.

“We were living in a high rise on Singer Island, and Liv and her friends were headed to Islamorada on a prop jet for the weekend. The plane went down in the Everglades. I spent close to a year watching them excavate the crash site. There were nights when I couldn't even go back to the hotel, so I slept in my car, right on Alligator Alley. My friends were afraid I was going to drink myself to death. I didn't, but it wasn't for lack of trying. They brought me up here to Wellington to stay with them, and I never left. I bought a place of my own near the old polo club and I watched matches every day, and then I started playing.”

“I loved her so much. She was only 27. My father and my grandfather were both dead before they were my age, 50. I thought I would be, too, but not her.” Teddy shook his head, narrowing his eyes in the bright sunlight.

“It was a *new* plane. There was no rain that day, no clouds, nothing. The damn plane just fell out of the sky.”

Lila was quiet for a while. She thought about the last time she saw Alejandro before that night. They had gone to dinner at a tiny place in Little Havana that only had five tables and always made Lila feel like she was sitting in somebody's kitchen. While they waited for their food, Alejandro did a charcoal sketch of the little cafe, with himself and Lila in the very center. He was always doing things like that, and Lila, who had never been sentimental, saved them. Their food came, and he handed the sketch to her. Lila remembered saying, “What if I don't want this one?”

Alejandro smiled, and kissed her. “Then burn it, and think of me.”

Finally, she spoke. “The man I loved got stabbed to death in Miami last year for no reason. I was standing right next to him.” It was the first time that Lila had said it

aloud, and it felt so odd that Teddy Townsend was the only person she thought could possibly understand her grief.

They rode in silence across the polo club, and Lila thought of an exhibit she went to with Alejandro in Miami. The theme was the Elysian fields, and Lila had thought the paintings were the most beautiful things she had ever seen. Now, she wasn't so sure.

“Do you like working for the magazine?” Teddy asked.

“Not really. It keeps me busy, though.”

Teddy nodded, understanding everything that Lila hadn't said. “Wellington's a good place to escape. Get some land, some horses, and you can lose five years. Ten if you're lucky.”

“Does that actually work?”

“For a while.”

Teddy was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke, his tone was thoughtful. “Are you thinking about going back to Miami?”

“No. Yes. I need to go somewhere, I think,” Emma said. It was a question she struggled with daily. Miami would be unbearable. The art world held no appeal for her now that Alejandro was dead. But she needed to leave Wellington, and soon, before she lost the next decade.

They were half an hour into their ride, taking the horses up the trail along the western edge of the polo fields. Lila realized that she hadn't gotten any quotes from Teddy for the article she was writing about the equine rescue foundation that he had recently established. She mentioned it to him and he laughed.

“On the way back. This is Lucy's favorite stretch of trail in the whole world.”

It was a straight shot of trail about half a mile long that ran the length of the polo club. Lucy pranced a bit and Lila wobbled.

“She loves to run here,” Teddy said. “You'll be fine, I swear.”

Lila patted the horse's solid neck and smiled. “Sounds good.”

“We'll see you at the other end,” Teddy said, grinning. He dug his heels into Beauregard and they set off at a gallop. A moment later, Lila and Lucy followed suit.

It was a perfect morning for riding. The Florida air was just barely cool and the ground was solid beneath Lucy's hooves. Lila could've sworn the horse was happy. Lucy picked up speed and the feeling was exhilarating, like total, absolute freedom.

Beauregard was about ten yards ahead of them and Lila wondered if Lucy was intending to close the distance. She hoped so.

## ISLAMORADA

From a distance, Andy Cohen could barely tell his mother, Vera, and his sister, Violet, apart. They sat on opposing sides of their usual table at Negril Bay, looking like bookends with their bright sundresses, big black sunglasses, and deep Key West tans. It was a perfect day in early September, a warm breeze mingled with the sound of steel drums, and the spicy smell of jerk chicken permeated the outdoor restaurant, which was shaded by banyan trees that grew up through cracking gray floorboards. The women's stony expressions had been visible all the way from the parking lot.

"Hi," Andy said. He walked over to their table and Vera stood up and kissed him on the cheek. Violet didn't move, though from the set of her jaw she appeared to be gritting her teeth. Perfect.

"Hello, darling, busy morning? I know your schedule was packed," Vera said. As she sat down her eyes slid over to the dark screen of her Blackberry. Her voice was smooth and professional, as always, with an added edge intended for Violet. What had she done now?

"Not too bad. I showed a house on Little Torch Key and the client seemed motivated. The papers were signed on the acreage deal in Big Pine Key, and the buyers of the place on Tavernier are ready to go into escrow pending inspection. Everything looks good."

"Excellent," Vera said. Andy nodded and looked at his silent sister, her eyes hidden behind pricey black frames.

"So...what's up?"

Violet turned her head, her lips pressed tightly together. She reminded him of a wild animal tensed to spring, and, like their mother, Violet usually went straight for the throat.

“We were just discussing the Key Largo Local Leader's Conference. You know they've asked me to speak this year, and I was hoping that Violet would come along. But it appears she has other plans. The Ghost Walk, is it?”

“The Island Walk. I've always wanted to go. It will help me with my work.”

Violet's latest distraction was an epic poem about a hurricane that tore through the Middle Keys in the 1930s. Their father used to tell them a story about it. He had a story for everything. Andy had made a point of not showing any interest in Violet's project.

“The last time I checked, you worked for me,” Vera said, referring to the open houses that Violet was tasked with running.

Tough love was the order of the day, apparently. There had been a time when Andy's mother and sister were thicker than thieves, but it hadn't been like that lately. Violet was 24, and irresponsible. She'd flamed out of college her first semester, and had since done stints as a bartender, a candle maker, a florist and a tour guide at the Hemingway House down on White Street. When it came to careers, Violet had definitely not taken after their mother.

Vera Cohen had gotten her real estate license when Andy was nine, the same year that his father had packed his belongings into an old catamaran and set sail to nowhere. Andy and Pete didn't really speak, though Violet kept in touch with him and occasionally went with him on his excursions. Pete called himself a maritime anthropologist, but really he was just a burnt-out dreamer who chased stories about shipwrecks laden with untold treasures around the Keys and the Bahamas. Vera, meanwhile, had made herself into one

of the most successful real estate agents in the Keys. Soon after Andy graduated from college in Miami he joined her in the profession, and now The Cohen Group, as they called themselves, was one of the most prominent real estate enterprises on the islands.

Drinks arrived and Andy smiled. Vera and Violet had ordered the same thing, a bubbly ruby cocktail made of roselle and champagne that Violet called a Dizzy Lizzy. She had been getting them since they were teenagers bumming around the island talking drinks out of tourists, and she'd turned Vera onto them a few years ago. Andy thought it was funny that Violet and Vera were always inclined to order the same thing, whether it was on the menu or not.

“How's Russell?” Andy asked. Russell, a long-haired Key West native who looked like Johnny Depp at his scruffy best, had been with Violet for nearly a year. Russell wore t-shirts that said things like “Follow Your Bliss” and had a skeleton key tattooed on his collarbone.

“Ask Mom, they're besties now.”

Andy cocked his head. In the beginning, Vera had despised Russell. Their first meeting, a brunch at Vera's condo in Key West, hadn't gone well. Vera's interrogation of him made the Spanish Inquisition look like afternoon tea.

“Tell me, Russell, where did you go to school?” Vera had asked, her tone curt.

Russell had an easy smile. It didn't look like he'd shaved in a week or two, something that Vera would take personally.

“Key West CC.”

“That's not a real school,” Vera said.

Russell laughed. “Nope, sure isn't.”

That morning had set the tone for those two. Andy hadn't really minded Vera's preoccupation with Russell because it kept her interest in his own love life to a minimum. Andy couldn't imagine what had changed his mother's distaste for Russell, though there was more to him beneath the beach bum persona. He was a marine conservationist and consultant for the government on coral reef projects. Andy's sister had unwittingly picked a boyfriend with a real job. He turned his attention back to his mother.

“Besties, Mom? You and Russell?”

Vera shrugged. “I told him he should ask his boss about setting up a 401(k), that's all. You know, some people aren't afraid of growing up, Violet. You might want to try it some time.”

Violet snapped. “When I first brought him home, you didn't want to let him in the house. Now the two of you are having lunch and chatting about retirement plans? For God's sake, he got his first haircut in two years because of that stupid dinner you made us go to.”

Violet had a point. Russell was the last person Andy would have expected his mother to take up as a cause. After she and Russell had left that first brunch the four of them had had together, Andy stayed behind to help clean up. Vera had been ranting and raving, which wasn't a terribly unusual gut reaction to the men Violet dated, but while drying the dishes Andy had glanced into the family room and spied his mother with her nose pressed to the couch cushion where Russell had been sitting. When she looked up and saw what must have been disapproval on Andy's face, she got a little defensive and said, “I was seeing if it smelled like pot.”

“Did you ever think that maybe he just needed a positive adult influence, someone to guide him down the right path?” Vera asked. The screen on her phone lit up with an e-

mail and Vera picked it up. She drew her sunglasses back on her forehead and pressed her chin to her chest as she scrolled down the message. Violet pushed up her own sunglasses and looked the phone in disgust.

“The right path? Your path! Russell and I were doing fine. Don't mess with it,” Violet said. Her soft brown eyes, now narrowed, looked so much like their father's.

Vera's eyes didn't leave her phone. “Of course, darling. The last thing I would want to do is interfere. Kids, I'm so sorry, but a stack of contracts just got signed off on and I have to go. Call me later if either of you are up for dinner. I thought maybe we could barbecue.”

Vera finished her cocktail, stood up, kissed each of them on the forehead, and walked out. She was stopped at least half a dozen times on her way to the parking lot by clients, competitors, and friends, all of whom received smiles and pleasantries. Violet glowered.

“You brought this on yourself, so don't even start,” Andy said. There was something to Vera's comment about Violet's immaturity. She was the youngest 24-year-old that he'd ever met.

“I didn't do this.”

“You shoved them together to piss her off, and it backfired. You should have known better. Once people hear Vera's gospel, they tend to convert.”

A waiter brought Violet a fresh cocktail and Andy ordered a Coke. Despite the fact that Violet had her own studio in Key West, she often stayed with Vera. It seemed that no matter how much they argued, Violet preferred to go to sleep at night in her mother's home. Andy had assumed that Russell, her first lengthy relationship, would change that, but he had taken to staying at Vera's as well.

For a while, Violet said nothing, and then, “I just didn't expect this. I loved him the way he was, and she's changing him.”

Vera had a way of doing that, of absorbing people into her world. She had tamed Violet's free-spirited boyfriend with alarming alacrity, dangling easy things like family dinners and ready praise in front of him and dazzling him with her vision of what his world could be. Vera was the best at that. Her face was plastered all over the Keys, on business cards and taxicabs, benches and billboards, her smile echoing The Cohen Group's omnipresent motto: Welcome Home.

Vera did more for prospective buyers than show them houses: she built worlds, entire lives, that encompassed everything they'd ever wanted inside four empty walls. She could read people better than anyone Andy had ever met: without asking she knew if the room adjoining the master suite would be a fully-loaded closet or a nursery. She had great timing, and she could make even the dullest clients funny. She made them feel smarter, wittier, sexier than they actually were; she made them see how happy they could be, and they always thanked her, profusely, for bringing them home.

Oddly, Vera never bought into the life she readily sold to others. Andy's mother was a master at buying low and selling high, and at any given time she had investment and rental properties from Key West to Marathon. She never stayed in a house or condo for more than a year or two, though, and it had been that way ever since Andy's dad left. Andy guessed that Vera's experience with Peter Cohen would turn anyone off of settling down. Violet ran her finger around the rim of her water glass and Andy heard it sing.

“I talked to Dad yesterday.”

Andy stiffened. Terrific.

“He's going to be in the Dry Tortugas next week. I'm thinking about taking the ferry out there to see him.”

Andy raised his eyebrows. If Violet wanted more than that from him, too bad.

“I told him about the Island Walk. He said that some of the old timers call the sandbars 'grave bars.' Isn't that crazy?”

“It is.”

“He'd really like to see you.”

“I'm sure he would.”

Violet put her hands on the table and twisted her fingers together.

“You could come with me.”

“No, I couldn't,” Andy said. He took a drink of his Coke, feeling his patience burn.

“Do you remember when he would take us to the beach while Mom was at school? You loved the one about the pirates.”

“I must've forgotten. I forgot a lot after he left,” Andy said.

“We used to be best friends. Do you remember that?”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen was black. No messages. Abruptly, he stood up.

“Sorry, Vi, but this looks important. I have to go. I'll see you at the conference.”

He left her there, at the table, looking not unlike she had when she was seven years old. Andy headed for the parking lot, stopping to acknowledge each of the people who smiled and spoke to him, Vera Cohen's son, as he passed.

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The Perry house on Islamorada was going to be a hard sell. Vera stood in the foyer and took a deep breath through her nose. The air was musty, but she didn't detect any mildew, thank God. She pulled a fresh-cotton-scented candle and matches out of her purse, put the candle on a ledge, and lit it. Other agents liked to spritz apple pie air freshener or pop a tray of chocolate chip cookies in the oven to make the house smell like home, but those smells were all wrong. Cloying, even offensive.

The house on Perry had been conceded to a jilted husband in an ugly divorce, and no one had lived there in months. It had a lovely view of a shallow blue-green harbor dotted with white sailboats, but bad karma clung to the place like a barnacle. It was still full of their crap, sentimental stuff, and that wouldn't do. No one wanted to view a property and feel like they were in somebody else's home. The owners of the house were still there, in spirit, haunting the place, and Vera's first order of business was to exorcise them. A forty-foot moving van was out in the driveway, and she had a crew of six movers standing by.

“I want all of the extra stuff out. That means clothes, pictures, electronics, bookshelves—anything that looks messy or cluttered, put it in the truck and the owner can sort through it later. And get that God-awful sofa out of my sight immediately.”

The movers went to work. Vera walked into the living room and pulled back the drapes, which were made of an awful, wistful yellow fabric with pink tulle cabbage roses, like a bridesmaid's dress from hell. It was a trend she'd had more than enough of. Shabby chic? Shabby shit. Vera pursed her lips and yanked the jaundiced drapes aside, sick that those ugly things had been obscuring such a beautiful view. Vera stood in the window, her arms folded. She never got tired of the water. She really didn't care where she lived, the

physical space, but she always felt a little sad if she looked out a window and didn't see the ocean.

Vera's phone buzzed. She looked at the screen and there was a text from Russell, saying that he would try to persuade Violet to come to her speech at the conference. She would listen to him, in the end. Vera imagined that conversation and hoped that Violet didn't get too lit up. Vera understood, of course; she wouldn't have been pleased if her own mother had interfered with her relationship with Peter, though, looking back, she wished that someone would've. As much as she didn't like Russell in the beginning, mainly because he reminded her of the man Pete turned into, she was grateful for him now. Violet wasn't like Andy; she wasn't independent, she just couldn't seem to get it together, and her imagination often got away from her. Violet had the sort of anxious, excitable disposition that Vera's grandmother called "nervous," and it gave Vera peace of mind that Russell could bring her daughter back when she got carried away.

Vera walked into the family room and cringed at the cast-iron signs on the mantle, spelling out the words "love," "laughter," and "serenity."

"Right," Vera said. She shook her head and took the tacky signs down, amazed at the things people tried to talk themselves into. She put them in a cardboard box and started loading up pictures. It was a sad montage: an underwater scuba wedding, the bride's brassy blond hair looking green in the shallow blue water, the happy couple at Fantasy Fest, a fat little dog dressed up like a caterpillar for Halloween. Into the box, all of them.

Vera called her office and asked her secretary to send her information about the Island Walk that Violet had been going on about. She didn't like the sound of it. It seemed like something Pete would be into. In so many ways, Violet was like her father: her

careless emotions, that reckless dreaming that would destroy everything if it wasn't kept in check. Violet had scared her more than once. Sometimes Vera would be talking to her, out on the patio, drinking wine like they always did, and her daughter just wasn't there. Vera tried, desperately, to remember what Pete had been like at the beginning of the end, but those memories were buried in a place she was afraid to disturb.

Vera had been deeply unsettled by a conversation she'd had a week earlier while walking with a friend, who suggested that Violet might be a good candidate for medication. She'd been startled, because it never occurred to her that there might be something medically amiss with her daughter, and she was shocked that her friend thought so. Perhaps there had actually been something wrong with Peter. She had always assumed that he was just the dark and dreamy type, "nervous" even, given to fits of passion and moodiness, certainly a Heathcliff instead of a Mr. Darcy. But diagnosable?

Vera didn't believe in depression, not really. She had a hard time swallowing what she saw on those mopey, maudlin TV commercials. Busy people didn't get depressed. When Peter confessed his dark feelings to her, at first she'd held his hand and sympathized, but inside, her bullshit meter was going wild. She wanted to demand that he explain himself. Was he sad, or dissatisfied with his career and the life they were building, or bored? Any of those, she could understand. Peter had never liked working a 9 to 5 on land, and neither he nor Vera were as cut out for marriage as they initially suspected. But to say that he was depressed? What did that mean? The end for them came swiftly. He didn't try to spare her feelings.

"I need to go away for a while. If I stay here, you'll find me at the bottom of the pool. Or the kids will," Peter had said. He'd been wearing a worn backpack that they'd

taken on a turtle-watching trip to the Dry Tortugas and he hitched it higher on his shoulder.

It took Vera a while to collect herself. She didn't actually believe that she'd find him drowned or hanging from the rafters, but she also wasn't willing to call his bluff. She looked into his brown eyes, so much like her daughter's, and held out her hand to him. There was a hint of something hopeful on Pete's face as he reached for her, but Vera just shook her head. "Give me your keys. We won't be in this house when you come back."

And they weren't.

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Peter Cohen hadn't known any traditional fairy tales. Looking back, it didn't surprise Violet that her father, a man who built his second life on stories, had few suitable for children. It was her favorite story of his that brought her to the south shore of Islamorada that night, some 15 years after the original telling, except tonight the man weaving horror out of sand and water wasn't her father, but a tour guide. This man looked like an old sea captain, with a white beard and a filmy jacket, though he must've been aiming for Hemingway when he got dressed for this evening's festivities.

It was the night of the Island Walk. There were many nights every year when the tide was low enough to walk across narrow shoals from the bony spine of main islands to a few of the smaller keys nearby, but this was the only one that received any fanfare. The event took place every year, near the beginning of September. The walk started on the southern tip of Islamorada, many miles from the conference in Key Largo.

"Do you need any help with that torch, miss?" asked another old man, also dressed like Hemingway. He circulated amongst the dozen members of the group, all of

whom paid \$75 for the experience of walking through the muddy black sand between Islamorada and the small plot of land in the distance that was officially unnamed but locally known as Flagler Key.

“No, I think I got it,” Violet said. She flicked a small switch on the base of the lantern, which was made of some kind of heavy, solid looking plastic but clearly intended to evoke something Victorian.

Fellow revelers moved around in the darkness, their shadows lingering close to the bobbing lights of the lanterns. The lights were low, because this was a night for a ghost story, after all, and bright lights simply wouldn't do. Violet wanted to be scared, to be terrified, and she felt close to all of these strangers who wanted the same thing. They had also heard her father's idea of a fairy tale, in one form or another, and they too had been swept away by the story. Like Violet. Like Peter Cohen.

Violet's father had packed up his boat and left town when she was seven, and in her mind his departure from their home had everything to do with the stories he told her and Andy. While Vera went to night school for her real estate license, Pete took them for long walks around the islands. They'd scavenge for sand dollars and black shark teeth, and he'd buy them frozen daiquiris without the alcohol and chewy fried conch and they'd sit in the warm evening sand as the night turned cool and listen to him weave tales out of water and stars.

He told them about pirates sinking Spanish galleons in the shallows off Little Torch Key, and how the sparkles on the water they saw during the daylight were caused by the sun glinting off the pirate's treasure, which was theirs for the taking. He had another one about the souls of lovers on the brink of death. Their final spark of life was

snatched away from Death himself by the god of the sea and hidden in the sky as stars over the Florida Keys.

Her brother used to love these stories. They were beautiful, and safe. He could listen to them over and over, but not Violet. Her heart belonged to a story much darker, one she demanded a hundred times as she sucked sweet-and-sour mix through a swirly pink straw. It was a story she could recite from memory and never forget a word because it really happened. The people in the story had once been alive, and they died violently. Violet cared much more for them than the pirates or the lovers because their story was sad and real, and it did not end happily.

“Do you want to be my buddy?”

Violet looked up at the tall, gangly boy standing a few feet from her. He was very young, maybe 15, with pale features, long dark hair, and bad skin. His clothes were black and he had a pair of surgical scissors welded to a chain around his neck. He looked nervous, like he was afraid Violet might demand his ID and call his parents.

Violet took too long to answer, and the boy rushed to fill the silence between them.

“That man said we need to pick a buddy, so no one wanders off. He said if anyone gets caught out there when the tide comes back in, they'll die.”

No doubt he couldn't imagine a more appealing way to go. He'd be a legend among his pasty little friends.

“I'm Ryan.” He held the lantern up to his face, and his smile was close-lipped and hesitant.

“Violet. It's nice to meet you, Ryan. So are we supposed to anchor ourselves together with string or something, Buddy?”

It was too dark to tell, but if Violet felt Ryan's face, she suspected it would be burning.

“No, I think we're just supposed to keep an eye on each other.”

The group set off with little fanfare. The Hemingway lookalikes kept up a constant patter. The damp sand was flat and densely packed for the most part, though occasionally it would go soft or give way to the water beneath it and someone would fall. The air was thick and briny, and it smelled as though the water had receded and left the worst things behind to rot. The long sandbar between Islamorada and Flagler Key would be submerged by five feet of water and a wicked current at high tide, but for now it was desolate and dead. There were no stars out tonight, no lovers to watch over the Keys, and the low harvest moon glinted dully off the silvery-gray scales of still fish that had been abandoned by the tide.

Flagler Key was a little over a mile out, and it was a slow-going trudge through the sand, so there was plenty of time for the Hemingways to stretch out the story. One of them started with a dull monologue about how bad the Great Depression was, and what the Keys looked like in 1935, but then it got interesting.

“FDR gave over 1000 World War I vets, Bonus Marchers, most of them, jobs constructing the Overseas Highway to Key West. There wasn't a road back then, just a plateau of pulverized coral packed down, and the men lived on the side of it in tents and barracks thrown together with a few cheap pieces of plywood and some nails.”

The man's voice was deep and resonant, and Violet felt the familiar spell spread through her limbs like a large glass of wine.

“It was Labor Day, 75 years ago this month, and a storm was brewing down in the Straits of Florida. It was small and poorly organized, and the people down in Havana sent word that it was barely a hurricane. Many of the locals didn't bother to board up their homes.”

Violet's pulse quickened and she felt the energy in the band of strangers rise in pitch.

“I always feel guilty for saying it, but I love this part,” Ryan said, his voice low. His eyes were black.

“By dawn on Labor Day morning, the storm that would never be named was the most powerful cyclone ever recorded in the Atlantic. There were wind gusts of over 200 miles per hour, and bands around the eye may have reached 250. We'll never know because all weather instruments broke. The storm surges were 30 feet higher than normal.”

The other old man cleared his throat. He walked backward with his lantern held aloft so that he could see the group. The dark shape of Flagler Key, a sparsely treed scrub of land, rose behind him in the middle-distance like an ink splotch on the horizon. The sand was solid beneath her feet, but beyond that Violet couldn't tell what was land and what was water. She grabbed Ryan's elbow, just to feel something real, and he tensed but didn't shrug her off. The old man now leading the tour spoke his part. His delivery wasn't as rehearsed as the other Hemingway's.

“There was a last minute evacuation effort for the veterans once the reports started coming in from the barrier islands, before those posts were swept away. The vets were

loaded onto train cars on Flagler's railroad, and the plan was to take them up to Marathon, but there was a delay. Someone in Washington thought the people down here were overreacting.

“It was after eight that night when they were cleared to go, and they weren't a mile out of the station when the first waves hit the island. Every car on the train except for the locomotive was washed away, along with houses, stores, cars, and people. The survivors who escaped the train cars were left to face the catastrophic winds. When their bodies were recovered days later, many were impaled by airborne detritus and their skin was blasted away by flying sand.”

The only noise was the collective squish of the tour groups' rain boots and water shoes sinking into the sand and the sound of water lapping at the edges of the sandbar. The water was a little closer now, so they had to walk shoulder to shoulder in rows of two. They were very close to Flagler Key, where several of the train cars had been recovered. Images of swollen bodies bursting from the train cars had preoccupied Violet for years. This was the story her father had told as they sat on the sand and watched the blood-orange sun dip beneath the horizon.

For an absurd moment, Violet wondered if the passengers had imagined the stories that would be told, right before the end, when the train cars had been toppled by the wind and skipped over the ocean like pebbles across a pond. She could see them clearly, broken and bleeding as water seeped into the overcrowded cars. It would have come first as a trickle, then a gush, the steel giving way to wind and the weight of water. Had they known that they would be written about? It was a possibility that Violet saw with far greater clarity than anything that happened in her own life.

Their arrival at Flagler Key was anticlimactic. With the theatrical part of their show over, the Hemingways got down to the logistical business of tragedy: the train cars were here, the bodies were there, the rescuers-turned-cleanup-crew built a funeral pyre at the top of that ridge, right where you're standing, and burned all the corpses to keep disease from spreading.

Violet listened hard for the screams of agony that were employed as a chorus in her poetry, but heard nothing other than excited murmurs from other members of the tour group. She looked up in hopes of seeing shades of men hanging from the palm trees, and saw only empty sky. Violet squinted her eyes at the gentle tide breaking on the shore, straining to make out anguished faces in the waves, but there was no hint of the horror Flagler Key had seen. Until she stepped foot on the island, Violet had been certain that some trace of those people would remain, but there was nothing.

“I guess this is all we get,” Ryan said. He sounded very young.

“Death and a gift shop,” Violet said.

As she stood on the small beach, Violet felt as lost as ever. The future was painful to contemplate. She would go home and stare at her blank computer screen waiting for verses that wouldn't come out right or beautiful. Russell would wake up in the morning and see her red eyes and messy hair and the muddy shoes by the door and finally realize what a lost cause she was. Eventually that disastrous epic poem about the hurricane would be shelved alongside her other bad ideas in a place best forgotten, and she would finally acquiesce to her mother's desire for her to try her hand at real estate, and, possibly, a low dose of antidepressants. And that would be her life. And no one would ever tell their children stories about her. No wonder her father couldn't bear it.

A lantern rose high in the distance. One of the Hemingways spoke, though Violet couldn't tell which one. "Okay everyone, the tide's coming in and our road is going to disappear in the next hour or so. Time to head back."

Violet sat down on a crest of sand, her hands on her knees. Ryan sat down beside her. The strangers were walking away and her connection to them diminished. They were only lanterns now, lowlights on the thin ribbon of sand leading back to Islamorada and the life she moved through like a ghost. Ryan nudged her with his bony shoulder.

"We should stick around, Violet. Kill the lantern, stay put on the sand pile and let the tide roll in. They probably won't even notice that we're gone."

"You're not much of a Buddy, you know that? How old are you, anyway?"

"Fifteen, but my grandma says I'm an old soul."

Violet smiled. The sounds of the tour group receded and all she heard was the light breeze threading through the pines. The smell of the water rolling in was clean and salty, as though it had been purified. Violet wondered if that's how her father felt as his catamaran drifted over the ocean, alive with stories about lovers and pirates, and all the other eternal guests of the sea.

## ARRHYTHMIA

Hannah was sitting next to Anders in the waiting room at the Lower Keys Cardiac Center when her mother's heart stopped beating. It was part of a scheduled cardiac ablation, a procedure that her mother Ellen had described as a “routine solution for a minor wiring problem,” followed by, “Don't give me that look, Hannah. Everything is going to be fine.” The power of those words, once magically healing, had diminished from years of overuse and this time they did nothing to assuage Hannah's fear. Despite Anders' presence, she felt very alone. Hannah missed her father, Harvey, whose responsibility to Ellen had been dissolved by the divorce a year earlier. More than Harvey, though, she missed her twin sister, Molly, the person who was supposed to be sitting beside her. Instead she had Anders, Ellen's boyfriend of about six months. Hannah knew him just well enough for the silence between them to be uncomfortable.

The waiting room was disorienting. It was like a portrait of Key West painted by a person who had never been there. A vaguely tropical soundtrack played from unseen speakers and the glossy rattan furniture was cushioned with hues of sage and cream. The floors were made of blond wood and bright arrangements of silk flowers with plastic beads of dew wilted over low coffee tables stacked with magazines. The receptionist's desk was hidden behind frosted glass and blond nurses milled about in flowered scrubs, always smiling. It was a vision of the island conjured for tourists, a cross between a Jimmy Buffet song and a Tommy Bahama store, with portraits of Hemingway on safari thrown in. A ceiling fan with blades shaped like palm fronds cut through the air, but the waiting room still smelled like a hospital, astringent and clinical, exactly the sort of place where people died.

Sliding doors whooshed open in a rush of pressurized air and a young doctor came into the room.

“You're Ellen Mitchell's family?” the doctor asked. They were the only people in the waiting room. The doctor was young and energetic, the type of guy who looked like he began his day with a brisk run around the island.

Hannah and Anders both stood up. “I'm her daughter. My name's Hannah. This is Anders, Ellen's friend.”

Ellen was the only family that Hannah had left in the Keys. Her grandparents were all dead, and Ellen and Harvey were both only children. Growing up, Hannah and Molly were the only ones among their friends without aunts and uncles and cousins. Though the Mitchell's had many friends in Key West—which is essentially a small town that happens to get over a million visitors per year—the family itself was dwindling.

“Nice to meet you both. I'm Dr. Louis. I'll be observing the procedure today and I'll be sure to let you know how it's progressing.”

The doctor had a calm, reassuring demeanor. Hannah had thoroughly investigated the cardiac center and the doctor who would actually be doing the procedure—both were top rated. Dr. Louis continued, gesturing with his hands as he went.

“The anesthesiologist put your mother under a local anesthetic and Dr. Patel made the incision a few minutes ago. The procedure should take about three hours and then she'll go to recovery so that we can monitor her vital signs and make sure everything looks good.”

The young doctor made eye contact with both of them as he delivered reassuring patter about how well the procedure was going to go. An arrhythmia had been detected

weeks earlier during a routine stress test when Ellen's heart rate soared above the normal range. Tachycardia, he called it, caused by a tangle in her heart's circuitry.

“Ellen's condition is actually something that we see fairly often. She's just got some wires crossed.”

“And how do you uncross them?” Hannah asked, even though she'd read everything she could find about the procedure and had a basic idea of how it worked. She didn't like it when medical personnel used metaphors.

“We insert a catheter outfitted with an electrical pulse through her groin, travel up to the heart, stop it—just for a minute—and burn through the affected area. The scar tissue blocks communication between the nerves that are misfiring. Once the nerves are dead, the system gets rebooted and she'll be good as new.”

“The system gets rebooted? Like a computer?” Anders asked.

The doctor nodded. “We re-start the heart.”

“And that always works?” Hannah asked. She pictured the empty screen that showed up on her computer at work one time, causing her boss at the tourism board to wince. The office boy called it “the blue screen of death,” and it had prompted a trip to the Best Buy in Marathon for a replacement desktop. Hannah imagined the doctor trying to restart Ellen's heart and getting an error message.

“This is a very safe procedure,” the doctor said.

Hannah closed her eyes for a moment and felt ill. They called it a simple, outpatient procedure, but it didn't change the fact that they were going to stop her mother's heart. They were going to kill her.

“Jesus Christ,” Anders said. He looked pale. Hannah liked the urgency in his voice, the alarm. It felt familiar; amidst all of the soothing reassurances, it was a pocket of doubt upon which to gain purchase.

The doctor smiled. He was affable and kind and completely unruffled by the act that his colleague was about to perform on her mother's heart, and Hannah hated him a little for that. She suspected that Anders hated him too, and that helped.

“It sounds like much more of a production than it actually is, I promise. There's always a risk, but she'll be feeling much better very soon. It's a standard electrical problem, just some botched wiring that needs to be fixed.”

“No,” Anders said, shaking his head, “It's her heart.”

For Hannah, it was impossible to think of her mother's heart as a jumble of wires on the fritz. When she thought of Ellen's heart, she thought of kindness and baked goods and dance recitals; power and wires were for bombs that needed to be defused. A time bomb in her mother's chest. Was that what he was saying?

“She'll be in recovery before you know it,” the doctor said. He put his hand on Hannah's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. He had a nice smile, and he was clear-eyed and genuine. But still.

The doctor should've left, but he lingered and looked at Hannah. “This condition tends to run in families, and it's more common in women. It's something that you'll want to have on your radar in the future. Are you Ellen's only child?”

Hannah shook her head. “No, I'm not. I have a sister.” A twin, she wanted to add, but it didn't seem relevant and then the doctor was gone. Being a twin had always seemed like a spectacular thing to Hannah, who as a child had reveled in being one of a pair, a matched set. It seemed only fair that everybody should have one. As children, she and

Molly had done everything together, and for Hannah it had been wonderful. Having a twin was like an insurance policy against ever being alone. Only it wasn't. Hannah didn't know where Molly was now, or even *who* she was anymore, and she missed her sister every day.

After feigning an interest in college for a few semesters, Molly had dropped out of school when she and Hannah were 20. She worked double shifts at the Hog's Breath Saloon and led ghost tours through the cemetery on weekends. She sold her car and her jewelry and one day just announced that she was leaving Key West. Molly didn't know where she was going, or if she did, she didn't tell Hannah.

After the doctor left, Hannah and Anders sat there in silence, neither of them sure what to say. A clock on the wall emblazoned with the purple logo of a popular antacid ticked and tocked, and Hannah remembered something she'd read about the staggering amount of money that marketing companies got for naming prescription drugs.

"I watched the procedure on Youtube to see how it works. I brought my iPad if you'd like to see it? We could follow along in real time," Anders said. He looked anxious, and younger than Ellen said he was. Anders appeared to be in his mid-thirties, and Ellen was almost 47. He was a partner in an import company that sold teak furniture from Indonesia, rugs from India, and specialty products from China. Anders had turned her mother on to bikram yoga and oolong tea, and though Hannah had doubts about the long-term viability of the relationship, she had to admit that Ellen was happier than she'd been in years.

"I don't think so. But thanks." Hannah had left a seat open between them, using it for her purse and the book she had no intention of reading. Hannah was terrible at this

sort of thing—the hard stuff—and she was anxious to be facing a future of it alone. This was a burden to be shared by her sister—not the young fling her mother had met at Fantasy Fest. It seemed increasingly unfair to think of Anders that way as he began to occupy more and more space in her mother's life, but that was an issue to be filed in a different part of her brain for later evaluation.

A peppy nurse emerged from the frosted amber enclosure holding a clipboard in her thin, tan hands. She walked over to the corner where Hannah and Anders were encamped and handed the clipboard and a pen to Hannah.

“Please sign this, Ms. Mitchell, so that we can release your mother's records to her regular doctor for his file.”

Unsure of whose name she should be signing, Hannah scribbled something in cursive on the line marked with a star and handed the clipboard back to the nurse, who looked it over.

“Oh, please date it as well.”

Hannah took the form back and dated it, feeling a weight settle somewhere in her chest as she handed back the form with three carbon copies beneath it. From here on out, she would be the responsible party, the next of kin, the emergency contact. For Ellen and for Harvey, too. It was hard to say what would happen to her father by himself in Miami. He had a stressful job and he ate too much steak and anyway Miami was a dangerous city. Anything could happen, and when it did, Hannah would be the one getting the terrible phone call. If there were decisions to be made, Hannah would have to make them alone. She wondered if Molly had ever thought about that.

“Do you want some coffee?” Anders asked. He had sandy hair with gold highlights that brought out his cow eyes and gentle bone structure. His face wasn't quite beautiful, but well thought out nonetheless.

“No thanks.”

“That's right, Ellen said you don't drink coffee. What about some tea? It probably won't be very good—the stuff in bags never is—or I could run over to the place next door...”

“Tea would be great, thanks.”

Anders nodded, looking relieved to have something to do. “Hot or cold? Sugar or cream?”

“Iced, thanks. No sugar.”

“I'll be back soon. You'll text me if you hear anything?”

Hannah nodded and said she would. As soon as Anders was gone, she shut her eyes and tried to breath normally, but there was something like a hill in her throat that made taking even the tiniest sip of air a struggle. Hannah hadn't slept the night before, and when her boyfriend Jason had finally gotten home from his shift with the Coast Guard she had been alone in their dark family room with the computer in her lap, her eyes aching from the screen's back-lit glow, working herself into a frenzy on WebMD. She'd already seen the video of the procedure that Anders' had offered to show her on his iPad. Twice. It was the one where everything had gone according to plan, with no mention of the myriad things that could go wrong. She wondered if he'd seen any of *those* videos.

The night before, Jason had walked through the heavy wooden front door, which was bowed and prone to sticking after years of weather exposure, tossed his keys in the

starfish bowl, and turned on every light between the entry and the family room. They rented an old parsonage behind the Star of the Sea chapel, and every morning Hannah woke up to the sound of church bells and the smell of the ocean breeze. She couldn't imagine why anyone would ever give that up, and that was why she would never understand Molly. Hannah didn't know how she and her sister—her twin—could look at the exact same thing and see two completely different realities.

“It's so beautiful here, Molly. How could you ever want to leave?” Hannah had asked her sister before she left, nearly five years ago.

“It's small. It's dirty. The place is a tourist trap,” Molly had said, zipping up her suitcase. She'd dyed her hair a violent shade of red that week, and it looked very different from their natural color, which Hannah had never touched. “I guess I just don't want it to trap me too.”

Hannah didn't mind the tourists, and that was something that she and Jason had in common. He'd also grown up on the island, and when he wasn't working for the Coast Guard he led fishing and sponge diving expeditions on his uncle's boat. Jason had some issues of his own, which was probably why he had only looked at Hannah with mild disapproval when he found her scouring the internet at three that morning for things that could potentially go wrong during Ellen's procedure.

“I thought you were spending the night at your mom's,” Jason had said. He took off his shoes and sat down next to Hannah on the couch. He looked tired but animated, the way he always did after a 12-hour shift patrolling the ocean for foundering boats, drug runners, and Cubans in dinghies and Cadillac rafts floating across the 90-mile maritime border between Havana and Key West. Jason loved his job, especially when it got exciting.

“I was going to, but Ellen wanted to be with Anders,” Hannah said. She traced her finger over the mouse pad on her laptop and scrolled down to a video of an angioplasty on a medical web sight. It wasn't the same procedure that Ellen was having, but it was similar, and just as horrifying.

“You wouldn't want to interfere with love,” Jason said, smiling.

“Stop it. That's gross. I told her I'd be there at five sharp to pick them up.”

Jason brushed her hands off the keyboard and shut the computer. Hannah protested but he just shook his head and said, “Enough. Are you sure you don't want me to try to come with you for moral support?”

Hannah did want him to come but she said no. Jason hated hospitals as much as he loathed darkness. His fear of the dark and Hannah's general sense of impending doom had presented challenges early in their relationship, though Jason's fears were easier to manage than Hannah's. It had taken the better part of a weekend and two trips to Home Depot to find low-wattage light bulbs for their bedroom that they could both live with, but they made it work. The 15-watt incandescent bulb in the lamp on their dresser burned all night long, bathing the room in candlelight. But then on the nights when Jason wasn't home, Hannah turned off all the lights and pulled the metal shutters on the jalousie windows tight, entombing the parsonage in cool, silent darkness.

The picture window was the waiting room's saving grace. The morning sky was gray and bruised, and frothy white caps swirled over dark water. A white sailboat rose and fell in the middle distance and far beyond it small, heavily treed islands poked through the horizon. As children, Hannah and Molly had fantasized about commandeering a ship and running away to one of those islands and living in a tree house

like the Swiss Family Robinson. Instead of being on the run with her sister, now Hannah sometimes worried that she would never see Molly again. Hannah had a lot of fears, though, the most pressing of which was playing out at that very moment behind a set of wooden doors that looked like they belonged in a cabana. Hannah briefly wondered if the doctors worked to the same tune of steel drums that was seeping from the invisible speakers playing overhead. Hannah imagined the dissonance of that bright, happy sound mingled with the electronic Eeeeeeee of Ellen's heart flat-lining on the monitor.

Anders returned with raspberry iced tea and a clear plastic container of pastries from the place next door. Hannah thanked him and accepted the iced tea and a bright little puff of phyllo and air filled with yellow star fruit from a local carambola orchard and topped with soft marzipan flowers.

“Nothing yet?” Anders asked. He checked his watch. “They should be about halfway through.”

Hannah shook her head. After standing awkwardly for a moment, Anders sat down in the chair one over from hers and frowned. They were bad chairs, stiff and too narrow, with a back that curved flush against Hannah's spine. Sighing, she gave in and took a bite of her pastry, which was sweet and sour and light and buttery all at the same time. She and Molly had grown up eating the dense, sugary star-shaped fruit from a small stand of trees in their grandparents' backyard, until the trees attracted a nest of black snakes and Molly was bitten. The bite left a silvery scar on her ankle that horrified Hannah but had delighted Molly because “it looks like one of those white tattoos.” Hannah put the pastry down on one napkin and covered it with another. Anders looked at her.

“No good?” he asked.

“It's fine. Really it is. I just can't,” Hannah said. It had been a long time since Hannah had thought about those snakes and Molly's scar. It was a nightmare or an interesting souvenir, depending on which sister you asked.

“Have you heard from your dad? He called Ellen last night to wish her good luck,” Anders said.

“Yes, he asked me to call him later and let him know how everything went.”

Anders was quiet for a moment. “It's good that they still care about each other. That they can talk.”

Hannah nodded. “It is. They were together for over twenty years. It's kind of funny. They get along so much better now than they did when they were married.”

“A happy divorce will do that,” Anders said.

Hannah smiled. “That sounds like something my sister would say. She knew their marriage wasn't going to work out a long time ago.”

There were a lot of things that Molly blamed Hannah for, and the persistence of their parents' marriage was one of the big ones. They'd had the same conversation a million times if they'd had it once:

“They don't love each other any more. They don't even speak. Why won't anyone but me acknowledge that?” Molly would say. “It's crazy. You're all delusional.”

“Will you just leave it alone and let them be? It's fine. Everything is going to be fine.”

It sounded a lot more convincing when Ellen said it. Molly had been gone for nearly a year when Harvey had moved out of the family home on Alberta Street, a large pink house with a tin roof that looked like it had been built in a dream. Hannah had been

helping her dad pack up his home office when Molly called. Ellen had made a point not to be home that day and Harvey was out buying more boxes, so it was Hannah who answered.

“Hi Han, I didn't expect to get you. How's it going? What are Mom and Dad up to?” Molly sounded good—young and light.

“They're getting a divorce,” Hannah said, silently adding, *I hope you're happy.*

Molly didn't say anything for a moment. “I'm sorry, Hannah. I think this is for the best, though. They can both get on with their lives while they're still young enough to enjoy themselves. I really think we'll all be better off.”

Hannah thought about hanging up, but she didn't. “Where are you?”

Hannah heard her sister drumming her fingers against the metal plate of a pay phone, and she wondered where she found one. Hannah had begged Molly to get a cell phone, even offering to pay the bill for her. But Molly said she'd only lose it, either by accident or on purpose.

“I'm in New Orleans. I've been dating a musician and we're going to the jazz festival. I'm staying with some friends who helped me get a job on a cruise ship, and the first trip is to Alaska. We leave next week. The one after it is headed to Norway, so I hope they keep me on.”

“That sounds cold. And touristy. You hate tourists and you're working on a cruise ship,” Hannah said. Even she and Jason drew the line at cruises.

“It's different when you're the tourist, I guess. I'll send you a post card.”

That was all they usually got. The occasional phone call to let them know that she was alive, the rare plea for a wire transfer if she'd gotten herself in a jam, and every now and then Molly sent their parents funny souvenirs from places that she'd been—wooden

clogs, a sombrero, a lasso—which always made Ellen laugh. Unlike Hannah, Ellen didn't think that Molly was out of her mind. She admired her and thought that her wanderlust was an interesting phase, saying, “If I hadn't been so young when I got married and had you girls, I might've liked to do something like that. Set off for a few years, see the world.” Harvey's view of the situation was much less romantic, but he wasn't worried about Molly either. “She'll come home when she gets tired.”

To Hannah, Molly always sent post cards. She never said much in them, though, and there was never a return address. Hannah's lost twin did not want to be found.

The waiting area was getting stuffy and Hannah didn't like the way the curving back of the lacquered rattan chair pressed flush against her spine.

“Are you doing okay, Hannah?” Anders asked. When their conversation had faltered, Anders had resorted to his iPad for comfort. Hannah wondered if he found as much relief disappearing into the smooth bright screen as she did. Jason didn't get that. He only saw it making her anxious. Briefly, Hannah wondered if Ellen had ever tried to take Anders' tablet away from him.

“I was just thinking about my sister. She should be here. I don't have any way to reach her. No address, no phone number, nothing. Our mother could die and Molly would never know,” Hannah said.

Anders straightened up in his chair. “She's not going to die, Hannah. At least, not of this. I'm worried about it too, but you can't let it make you crazy.”

Hannah took a sip of her now-watery iced tea, the condensation running down her wrist. “I know.”

The music played on overhead—a Bob Marley melody—and muffled sounds drifted through the frosted glass. A water cooler with a stack of cardboard cones hummed and burbled in the corner of the room, and outside the sky brightened as the sun burned through the clouds. Hannah picked up her book and held it in her lap and waited.

Some time later, Dr. Louis came back and they both stood up. He smiled at Hannah and Anders, though perhaps not quite so confidently as before. There was a shift in the air when he entered the room. Hannah glanced at Anders; he'd felt it too. This was it, the moment that Hannah had been dreading; it was the late night phone call, the abnormal biopsy, the DNR. The world at the corners of Hannah's eyes went black and she had to shake herself to keep standing.

“What happened?” Anders asked.

Dr. Louis held up his hands in front of him. “There's nothing to worry about. The ablation went well. Ellen is in recovery and her vital signs are stable. Dr. Patel does want to give her a heart monitor to wear for a week or so just to make sure that everything is functioning the way it should.”

“Why wouldn't it?” Hannah asked.

“There was a bit of trouble re-starting her heart, and her pulse was erratic for several minutes. It did stop, once, but that does happen in some patients. Dr. Patel brought her back right away.

“Brought her back?” Anders asked. His voice was incredulous and he put his head in his hands.

“It's sort of like a computer system reacting to being reprogrammed. It takes a while to adjust,” Dr. Louis said. There was a slight edge of impatience in his voice.

Hannah's mother had died twice that day and he had the nerve to talk about the human heart like it was a machine.

“No, it's not. It's nothing like a computer at all,” Hannah said. She imagined her own heart beat, the eurythmic thump of it pulsing in her chest and throat, visible through the translucent skin of her wrists.

A few weeks later, Hannah was sitting on a boat at sunset, the sky stretched above the horizon like an endless watercolor. The boat was anchored off Mallory Square, where a crowd was gathered to watch the nightly spectacle that always gathered to greet the coming dusk. There were tourists, of course, taking pictures as the sun sank lower and lower as if drawn to the water. The sun was a molten ball of gold and the sky a riot of pink and purple clouds edged in platinum; jugglers tossed sticks of fire high in the air and caught them and men urged sabers down their slender throats and strummed guitars as people tossed money into the open cases at their feet. From the boat Hannah could smell the fried conch and hear the the applause as the sun vanished into the horizon. A moment later, she realized that she was clapping too.

“It was a nice sunset. It's too bad Ellen and Anders decided to skip it,” Jason said. He dug two drinks out of a cooler and sat down beside Hannah, who was still watching the crowd watching the sunset.

“It is, but they had dinner reservations,” Hannah said.

Ellen's heart procedure had changed things. The scar burned into her heart had fixed its erratic beat, and while it worked a little differently now, Ellen's body had adjusted. She would be fine, and Hannah had decided that she would too, even when the hard choices fell to her because there was no one left.

“Have you heard from your sister?” Jason asked.

“I got a postcard from Maine a couple of weeks ago. Molly said that she'll be in the Dry Tortugas in a few weeks for turtle hatching season.”

Jason looked at Hannah, surprised. “That's only 70 miles from here by boat. We could take my uncle's catamaran if you want to track her down.”

Hannah smiled at him, sad but also a little relieved to finally be letting Molly go nearly five years after she'd left. “That's okay. Maybe she'll come home when she gets tired.”

Jason nodded and gestured his long, tan arm out over the open ocean. The air was warm and clean and salty and the boat barely moved in the calm water. “Is there anywhere else you'd like to go?”

In her mind, Hannah tried to create a panorama and see everything, all at once: the boat, the sky, the water, Jason. Panning out, she saw the square and the crowd, and Ellen and Anders, and the parsonage and the island that she loved. Somewhere beyond the edges of the imaginary picture Hannah saw Molly too, and that was where she let her stay.

“No, Jason. There's no where else.”

## THE WANDERERS

It wasn't that it didn't look enough like a cave: the entrance gaped open like a long, black throat that could lead to anywhere, stalactites poked through the ceiling, and water rushed beside or behind or beneath them—Cara couldn't tell where the noise was coming from—slicking the prehistoric walls and chilling the balmy South Bimini air. National Geographic couldn't have done it better. The problem was the trash.

Swept up against the walls of the cave were decades' worth of debris: bottle caps, candy wrappers, shards of glass, and wadded up bits of paper were packed into the cave floor like urban mulch, and when one of the workers adjusted the halogen lamps Cara saw that the wall had been tagged with graffiti. Excellent, Cara thought to herself. She'd promised the Wanderers an authentic experience on a real-life archaeological dig, one that had unearthed small skeletons similar to the bones excavated in Palau, and she'd delivered a site that looked like the underside of an overpass in Little Havana. She feared that the obvious intrusion of the outside world would diminish the thrill for the Wanderers. Cara looked at the small group of travelers crowding in behind her, hot and excited after the two-hour long ride in Jeeps from the resort, craning their necks to read the graffiti. They were a sea of khaki, and one woman, Mrs. Glynnan, was wearing a finely-crafted bamboo explorer's hat. Beside Cara stood Bernie Lowenstein, a retired insurance company executive from Boca Raton who joined the Wanderer's Club after his wife died. As Cara watched, Bernie read the tags on the cave wall, mouthing the lyrics to a mid-nineties rap song written there, "Mo' money, mo' problems," he said. Turning to Cara, he laughed, "That's true, you know."

Cara smiled. "I'll have to take your word for it." As the Wanderers walked around the mouth of the cave and took pictures, Cara followed a grad student named Mary to the

excavation site deeper in the cave. That day's activities, the final excursion on this trip, had been arranged through an anthropologist named Dr. Francesca Lima from the University of Miami, who had agreed to give a lecture and teach the group a hands-on lesson in excavation in exchange for their financial support of her project.

“Dr. Lima,” Cara said, “We made it. Thank you for having us.” The woman was tall and willowy, but with harsh, serious features.

“Thank you for coming. Are your Wanderers ready to work?” Dr. Lima dusted herself off, and Cara saw that she was standing in front of a 20x20 grid roped off with yellow tape. There were people brushing away the dirt one layer at a time, small particles laid out on folding tables, and packets of tools spread out around the perimeter. Water dripped down the walls, casting black halos around the spray paint, and thick cables were duct taped to the floor. Computers and large machines hummed and the throb of generators competed with the rush of unseen water.

“They're ready,” Cara said. “I'll go get them.”

Cara had discovered the travel industry during her sophomore year in college, which was also the year she dropped out of school. The work wasn't easy, but Cara had hated college. She'd had crappy jobs with impossible deadlines and shoestring budgets for the first few years, but after that her career had taken off. She was frequently contracted by magazines like *Travel & Leisure* and *Last Resort*, and she had a regular gig with a company called The Wanderer's Club, which paid her to guest host Platinum Premium trips for their adventurous members. In the past seven years, Cara had traveled the world. She'd been to Moscow, Rio, Swaziland, Dubai. She'd exchanged her dollars for rupees, pounds, kroner and yen. She'd been to the top of a building that rose high enough

to be seen from outer space, and aboard a boat that sent robots to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, never to be seen again.

And then there was the sinecure with the Wanderer's Club, a job that was less daring but far more reliable than anything she'd ever had before. It was a stable paycheck, with bonuses, that sated Cara's desire to see, to travel, to *go*, while at the same time giving her some stability and great perks. During the daytime, the Wanderer's Club offered its members authentic experiences that appealed to people who had seen everything else, and resort hotels to come home to every night. They got adventure, but they also got hot water, supper clubs, and mountains of warm, soft terrycloth. The best part for Cara, though, was the company. A few of the Wanderer's, like Bernie, had become like family to Cara. They'd seen the world together, and celebrated holidays in hotel dining rooms, savoring the sound of foreign tongues and anonymity. They knew each others reasons for wanderlust—Cara had even told them about her issues with her sister—and they comforted each other. They got lost in the world together, for awhile, and then disappeared into their other lives once more.

Dr. Lima hadn't been kidding when she said she was putting the Wanderers to work. After receiving instruction from one of the doctoral students, Cara spent the next two hours manning the sifter with Lisa Seton, a recently divorced hedge fund manager from New York. Cara's shoulders and back ached from pushing the metal sieve back and forth to separate the dirt from the stuff that wasn't dirt, yielding a metal cap, a chip of pottery, and a guitar pick. Cara was sweaty and dirty, but Lisa seemed to be having a good time. Just as Cara was about to suggest that they take a break, her satellite phone buzzed. Cara excused herself and pulled it out of her backpack. The expensive phone was

heavy and looked like a large walkie-talkie. Reception could be iffy in the cave, so Cara went outside to take the call. It was from home.

\* \* \*

Two days later, after seeing off the Wanderers at the main airport in Nassau, Cara sat on her suitcase at a small landing strip in Bimini. They would meet again in four months in Alexandria, where they would visit catacombs and the sites of the ancient library and the lighthouse. Cara had hugged each of the Wanderers at the gate. She missed them already.

“Just about ready,” Jason said, “I need to load your suitcase. Scoot.”

Cara sighed and stood up. Jason, her significant other of about three years, was a pilot who flew helicopters and small private planes around the islands in the Bahamas and the Florida Keys. He'd been in the military, stationed in the Middle East, but he didn't like to talk about it much. He said that he'd retired from counter-terrorism. Jason was 32, and Cara had liked him right away, though he'd made it clear early on that he needed his own space. Occasionally, he needed a lot of it, sometimes a sky-full of it, so he understood Cara and her traveling. He got the other stuff, too, after she'd explained it to him, the stuff about Juliet and the kids. He didn't press Cara about her sister or her niece, and on the bad nights when he couldn't sleep, she didn't leave him.

After he loaded her suitcase into the cargo-hold of a twin-engine Cessna named Lucy, Jason closed the hatch. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Cara shrugged. “No.”

“I'm sure your parents can handle this without you. And what about her husband?”

“Jason, they need me. They wouldn't have asked if they didn't.”

“I know, but I've seen what it does to you. I don't think your family realizes it. And Juliet never makes anything easy.”

Cara looked at Jason, taking in his brown eyes, excellent posture, the set of his mouth when he knew he was right. Sometimes Cara was startled by how well he knew her—she wasn't quite sure when that had happened. Jason looked away and walked to the front of the plane and opened the door for Cara.

“It'll be nice to see Ava. I wish the boys were going to be there too,” Jason said.

“Me too. My mom made it sound like they all needed a break.”

Cara's parents had sounded the same as ever, but anxious. It had been about three months since she'd seen them. They were amateur wanderers themselves, and on their last vacation, they'd invited Cara to meet up at a dude ranch in Montana. That had been before the latest trouble with Juliet flared up, of course, and Cara knew that she hadn't been imagining the stress in her Dad's voice:

“Juliet's not doing well,” Cara's father had told her. The satellite phone, like an old pay phone that ate twenty-dollar bills instead of nickels and dimes, was staticky and Cara heard a rushing blur of noise in the background. The TV was on, possibly more than one, and Juliet's twin boys were yelling hello in the background, with Cara's mother's voice above all of them.

“Cara, this is your mother. Can you hear me?!”

“Loud and clear. How are you, Mom?”

“Oh, fine. Your dad and I are going to Universal next weekend with Dave and the boys for the opening of that new dragon ride at the Harry Potter theme park. They're so excited. Tell your editor thanks so much for the tickets.”

“I will. So what's up with Juliet? Is Ava alright?” Cara asked. She could see her phone bill ticking upward like a Key West taxi meter going double time, and her chances of writing the call off as a business expense were rapidly dwindling, so she tried to hurry her mother along.

“Oh, Ava's great. Juliet's hit a rough patch, though. I hope you're not drinking the water.”

“I'm not.”

“Did you pack sunscreen?”

“I've been working in a cave. Put Dad on. Love you.”

“I'm back, Cara,” her dad said. “So you're having a nice time?”

“I'm working,” Cara said.

“Juliet set the patio on fire yesterday afternoon.”

“She what?”

“Juliet made a bonfire on the back driveway near the top of the boat ramp, and it got out of control. It took out the side of the pool cage and most of the furniture. Made an awful mess. This thing with Ava is really making her crazy. No one knows what to say to her.”

“Uh-huh,” Cara replied. So her sister had taken to building bonfires in the backyard.

“Your trip's almost over, right? You have a couple of weeks off? We're going to be in Orlando with Dave and the boys over the weekend, and your mother thought it would be a great opportunity for you to come up and talk to your sister. Try to help her sort herself out.”

That was easier said than done. “How's Ava?”

“The same. Though I'd think you'd want to see for yourself.”

Cara *did* want to see for herself, which was the only reason she was strapped into Jason's tiny airplane for the short trip to the Gulf Coast. Cara put on her headphones and the engines screamed to life and Jason smiled the utterly relieved smile that Cara only ever saw when he was flying a plane. She'd asked him to stay with her in New Port Noelle for a few days, and she wondered how that was going to go. Jason didn't like Juliet, and he thought that Cara's situation with her sister was absurd, which of course it was.

If Cara had known at 22 how conflicted she would feel now, she never would've given in when Juliet begged her to be an egg donor. She understood now why most couples used anonymous donors, even when family members were viable options. The doctor had tried to tell her back then, and at first Cara agreed. The first time they asked, she said no, but Juliet had been so desperate, and so earnest. She wanted her child to look like her.

Dave and Juliet were both lawyers, and had worn her down with arguments about familial obligation, gene pools, and the biological imperative, as well as assurances that any resulting children would never, ever be her problem. The process had taken six months, and for Cara it had been unpleasant and invasive. Ava was born, via surrogate, and Cara had loved her instantly. When Juliet decided to harvest the remaining eggs from their deep freeze two years later, she hadn't even mentioned it to Cara until the twins were already on the way.

Cara had never denied that it was an odd arrangement. It was an unusual sensation when Cara got pictures of Ava and the twins and saw her own features on someone else's

children. It was also a difficult thing to explain to people. Relationships were trying enough to sustain because of the amount of travel associated with her job; any additional weirdness just made Cara a harder sell. Jason had been taken aback when she mentioned the children.

“So they're technically your kids?” he had said.

“No, they're my sister's. Juliet and Dave are their parents.”

“Right, I get that, but technically, *biologically*, you have three children with your brother-in-law.”

Cara hadn't been able to think of a reply that she wanted to put into words. It was what he said next, though, that still had Cara feeling unsettled nearly three years later.

“But what if your sister dies or goes to jail or something? What's your responsibility to them? What would you do?”

That was something that had never occurred to Cara, but had bothered her ever since. It was a question for which she didn't have an answer, either then or now. Cara leaned back in her seat as the little toy plane taxied down the grassy runway, bracing herself for the moment when the wings caught the stiff current of the gulf stream.

\* \* \*

It was now four days after the fire, and the patio still smelled like smoke. The flames had melted one of the screens into frail bits of fused metal, the blackened wicker lounges were warped from the heat, and the Adirondacks were junk. The only seating area that survived was the concrete table beneath a tattered, smoky sidearm umbrella that had been there, overlooking Noelle Harbor, for as long as Cara could remember. The table was stationed next to a once-white fountain of a lion that was supposed to spit water

into the pool, but was missing an ear and hadn't worked in years. Juliet had named him Leo when they were children.

“I hope iced tea's okay,” Juliet said, setting two tall glasses on the already laden table, which had always been their favorite place to eat. During Cara's childhood, it had been the site of many tea parties, and the table was still the best place to watch the pearly-pink heat lightning that was a fixture of late afternoons in South Florida during the rainy season.

“It's fine,” Cara said. Then she took a sip and cringed. “What's in this?”

“Agave instead of sugar. It's unprocessed. I read something in JAMA about unprocessed foods being better for kids like Ava, so I threw everything out and restocked the pantry.”

“JAMA?”

“Journal of the American Medical Association. I bought a subscription.”

“Why?”

“I was trying to help my daughter.”

“Oh. You didn't have to do all this.”

Even in the midst of her own spectacular meltdown, Juliet was a gracious hostess. Cara had often thought that her sister would greet even the four horsemen of the apocalypse with iced tea and snacks. The table was set with bamboo mats with matching napkins ringed with a band of seashells, and the marquis-shaped plates featured a restrained tropical pattern that Cara liked.

“Lunch looks really good,” Cara said.

Juliet had prepared seared ahi tuna over a bed of spring greens dressed with a citrus vinaigrette. Cara folded her napkin over her lap and started eating. Juliet didn't.

“What's Jason doing today?” Juliet asked.

Avoiding you, Cara thought to herself. “He's out on the boat with Uncle Felix. Jason's never been deep-sea fishing before and I thought he might like it.”

“You've been together a while,” Juliet said.

“Almost three years. Don't start,” Cara said.

Juliet's frown accentuated lines on her face that hadn't been as noticeable the last time Cara had seen her. They framed her mouth like parentheses. “I didn't say anything. It's a long time to go without any commitment, though.”

“We're committed, Juliet,” Cara said. She stabbed a beet with her fork but didn't eat it. She put the fork down on the edge of the chilled salad plate and reached for the bread basket instead.

“Of course you are. When you're in the same country.” Juliet folded her hands on the table in front of her, and Cara noticed that she wasn't wearing her wedding band anymore. It was time to move on to a different subject.

“I'm not here for relationship advice.”

“I assume this isn't a social call?” Juliet asked.

“You know it isn't. This bread's really good.”

“It's tapioca. I saw an expert on Discovery Health who said that some children with neural development disorders respond well to a gluten free diet.”

“Neural development disorders? I just thought Ava quit talking to *you*. Do the doctors think there's something actually wrong with her?”

“No. They think it's me,” Juliet said.

Ava was almost six. She looked like a Burnside. She had fair hair and light eyes that changed from blue to green, and she had reached every milestone early. Cara had

been keeping track. She watched the rapid rise and fall of her sister's chest and thought about how blindsided her family had been by Juliet's meltdown. Cara was the only one who seemed surprised that Juliet hadn't snapped sooner.

For the most part, children remained an unknown quantity for Cara. They were loud, messy, and unpredictable. For nearly six years, Cara had been mostly content just knowing that the kids were doing well. Juliet had never once objected to Cara keeping her distance, coming home only a few times a year, which was easier for Cara anyway.

“I told the doctors everything I could think of—anything that might not have been on your chart. I told them how you snuck Grandma Vi's cigarettes when you were 11, that you smoked pot in high school, that you were so drunk that one time in college that they had to pump the alcohol out of your stomach. Remember I had to come get you?” An accusation colored Juliet's tone, and Cara felt like her sister was building a case against her.

“And what'd they say?” Cara asked, wishing she was back in the cave in Bimini, or anywhere else.

Juliet shook her head. She had lightened her hair and the buttery yellow color drew attention to her anxious green eyes. She was a decade older than Cara, and starting to look it.

“I also told them about that silly tattoo you got that one year during Mardi Gras? The one you got lasered off? Maybe the laser did something to you.”

“Yeah, I remember it,” Cara said. “I think if lasers altered your genetic makeup, someone would have sued by now.”

“I even told Dr. Kingston about all the men—don't give me that look—in case you contracted, you know, *something*.”

“How thorough of you.”

“I've told them everything, about all of us. I think I may have offended Dave's family.” Juliet averted her eyes from Cara's, and Cara knew there was a story in that gesture, but she didn't ask.

“Before or after you banished him and the boys?”

When they got married, Dave and Juliet bought a house on the harbor down the street from Cara's parents. When the twins were born, Cara's parents traded houses with Dave and Juliet until they could either build up or buy a bigger place. After all this business with Ava started, Juliet decided that it was too stressful to focus on her daughter while her twin three-year-old boys were wreaking havoc, so she sent them and Dave down the street to stay with her parents. Juliet lived alone with Ava in the home that she and Cara had grown up in, where the doorways were marked with their heights. Juliet said that she liked it better there than her own house, and that was the last Cara heard about it.

At least, that was the rushed explanation Cara got from Juliet over the sat-phone two months earlier. It had seemed like an odd solution to Cara, but she didn't press the issue because Juliet's voice had a wobbly edge to it that never boded well. Cara had been on a tour of Angkor Wat that day led by one of the saffron-robed Cambodian Buddhist monks who tended temples. That night, in her travel journal, she taped a Polaroid of her tour group crouched in front of a towering limestone bas-relief of Vishnu. Before she left the country, she bought Ava and the boys traditional Cambodian kites as souvenirs. Unfurled, the kites were huge, and Cara had loved watching the Cambodian children fly them on twilit summer evenings. Broad strokes of silver paint graced the kite's thin paper wings, winking in the moonlight like stars falling to earth.

Juliet looked at her then, her eyes frantic. “Is there anything else that might have caused this? Anywhere you've been, anything you may have done? Please, just try to remember.”

“Why are you so sure this is my fault?”

Cara heard the napkin in Juliet's hands rip. “Because this is something you would do!”

“What?” Cara wasn't sure that she'd heard her sister right.

“When we were kids, you pulled shit like this all the time. Mom called it 'the silent treatment.' You would look at me and refuse to say anything and I would just get madder and madder. And you never did it to anybody else. Only me.”

Cara looked at Juliet, silently, and watched an angry flush creep up her sister's cheeks. “You're serious?”

Juliet rubbed her forehead, where two blue veins protruded in a deep V. “There's nothing diagnostically wrong with Ava. We've been to doctors, and therapists, and psychologists, and no one can find anything wrong with her. She talks to them, just not when I'm in the room.”

“And you think that has something to do with me?”

Juliet bit her lip. “There's some days when I'll be with her, and she'll do something, or give me a look, and I'll think, 'That's just exactly like Cara.' Do you have any idea what that does to me? I look at my daughter and I don't see myself. I see you.”

“Which is unbearable, clearly,” Cara said.

“You have no idea. This isn't fair, Cara. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I played by the rules. I did everything right. You didn't.”

“I work really hard.”

“I've always worked really hard—way before you did.” Juliet's bright green eyes had a silvery flash to them when she was feeling self-righteous, like now. “I guess you don't remember *those* days though, do you?”

Cara stared at her sister and Juliet shook her head and then stood up. “Never mind. I have to check on Ava.”

“Not remember?” Cara thought to herself. “As if you'd ever let me forget.” She would've liked to have told her sister to quit being dramatic, but everything she said was true. Nine years earlier, Cara had been a disaster. Juliet was the one who stepped in and saved her.

Cara still remembered the clipped sound of Juliet's heels echoing against the soft wood of the five-story walk-up Cara had been living in when she dropped out of college for good. The loft was in a century-old cigar factory with exposed brick and bad plumbing in an old Cuban neighborhood in Tampa called Ybor City. Her boyfriend was a dreamy graffiti artist in love with Banksy, so the place always smelled like aerosol paint and old cigars. He was even younger than Cara, and her best memory of him was of the rainy afternoon they spent, high as kites, potting an herb garden in an interesting-looking planter that Cara now knew to be a tandoori oven. By the time that Juliet was looming over her, filling up the room with her gold hair and tall boots, the rosemary was dead and the boy was gone.

“Mom called me. The university sent a letter to the house. Were you going to mention to anyone that you dropped out?”

Cara remembered laying down on the futon, the metal bar pressing into her back. “I thought I'd save that for Thanksgiving.”

Juliet walked over to the futon and sat down right on the bar. “Ow. Jesus, Cara, this thing is awful. This place is awful. Your life is awful. What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing.” Cara remembered being too tired to lie, or fight, or cry.

For a long time, Juliet sat there with her, her hand on top of Cara's head like she was giving her a blessing. Juliet had just made partner at her firm and gotten engaged to Dave, but Cara's envy of her sister's success was eclipsed by her relief at Juliet's presence. Cara didn't know how to get herself out of the mess she'd made of college, but her sister would. What Juliet did next, however, changed the course of Cara's entire life.

Juliet pulled something from her purse and pressed it into Cara's hands. Cara stared at the papers, the size of a stack of dollar bills, stapled and covered with electronic writing. “What's this?”

“It's a gift. A really nice one. Do you remember the trip I took for my firm last month?”

Cara nodded.

“My flight was overbooked and I volunteered to go on a later one. The next flight was canceled, though, and the one after it was delayed. I spent 14 hours at the airport in Memphis. Delta gave me vouchers for free travel, a lot of them. You've always wanted to wander off somewhere. I think it'll be good for you to get away, get some perspective. Maybe you'll be ready to go back to school when spring semester starts up.”

Cara held up the papers and raised her eyebrows. “So this is for a free trip?”

Juliet nodded. “Cara, it's a ticket to anywhere.”

Ever since then, Cara had been on the move, criss-crossing the globe like Holly Golightly, traveling. When Cara had needed an escape, a way to clear her head and figure out what her life was going to be, Juliet had given her nothing less than the world. That was at least part of the reason—how big a part, Cara didn't know—why she couldn't refuse the second time that Juliet had asked her to be their donor. Juliet hadn't simply been asking for a favor, she'd been calling one in. And Cara owed her everything.

\* \* \*

Once Juliet returned, it was a while before either of them said anything. They just sat there, looking out over the harbor. Cara missed home the most when she was right here, in this spot. She had never seen anywhere a sight finer than the view from her parents' back patio when the afternoon lightning storms rolled in off the Gulf. The lightning started off as a faint blur in the far distance, but within minutes it would be much closer, nearly overhead, a silent storm of pink, violet, and gold shocks of light flashing through oyster-colored clouds like short circuits but never falling to earth.

It was hard for Cara to be around the children for long stretches of time. She didn't know what her relationship with them should be, or even what she wanted it to be, but she felt a greater responsibility to them than that of an aunt. Also, now that she was an adult—though still younger than Juliet had been when she persuaded Cara that this wasn't a big deal—she resented the way her sister had manipulated her. Every time she saw Juliet these days, Cara felt a little mad, even though she was happy that Ava and the twins existed. For the past several years, it had just been easier to stay away, but Cara couldn't stand by and let her sister act like a lunatic around them either. That, she wouldn't do.

Cara had never really appreciated New Port Noelle until after she left, but now the storms and the harbor were never far from her mind. It was an ideal place for the kids to

grow up. The harbor, really a bayou, was a vast, silty basin where the brown waters of the Pithlachascotee River met the salty green Gulf of Mexico in a brackish marriage that made the water appear either shallow or depth-less, depending on the light. From her parents' backyard, which was landscaped with leafy hibiscus bushes that bloomed pink and orange, dense, sugary stalks of banana plants, and tall, crooked swamp cypress trees heavy with lush ruffles of gray-green Spanish moss, it felt like the entire world was a subtropical garden. The smell was off, though. The air coming off the water usually smelled like citrus and salt, but now there was only smoke.

“So what did you burn? I mean, besides the patio?”

Juliet shrugged. “I started with the medical journals. There were so many of them, and it was days before the garbage was going to be picked up, and I couldn't stand them being in the house any longer. So I took them out back and started a controlled burn.”

“With whiskey and a box of matches?”

Juliet ignored her. “The journals weren't helping, so I burned them. And it felt really good, so when the fire started to die down, I found more things to put on it.”

Cara said nothing, but she felt her heart beat faster. She wondered where Ava was when this was going on. Juliet continued.

“Then I burned the junk mail, and some files from work, bills from the insurance company—because it's not like any of those doctors actually did anything, right?—and a painting Dave gave me for our anniversary last year. He's been useless lately.

“Dad thinks that it was the law books that set everything out of control. The gilt on the pages—I always thought it was gold, but I guess it's just some cheap chemical

composite. When I put the books on the fire, sparks shot out everywhere and everything burned.”

“You burned your law books?”

Juliet's voice turned bitter. “I quit last week.”

“You quit?” Cara was stunned. Juliet loved being a lawyer, and she was great at it.

“Cara, I don't deserve this. It's not fair. I did everything right.”

Cara stared at her sister as the words flooded from her, oddly flat, past shouting, past tears.

“I'm losing everything. I haven't been able to help my daughter and I'm so mean to Dave that I think he's glad to be living with Mom and Dad. I don't like playgroups, or pre-school, or Harry Potter. I love my kids, but I wake up in the morning and think, this can't be my life. I miss my job so much. I always assumed that I'd get my career back when the kids were a little older, but now I'm not so sure. I can't do this much longer, Cara.”

Juliet put her face in her hands and then stared at the water. The sky was deep gray and gloomy, the breeze had picked up, and the horizon was a dark shadow in the distance. The air smelled like ash and electricity, and lightning bloomed across the heavy clouds in bursts of metallic color.

“I envy you, you know. I really do. You don't have to deal with any of this. Did you know that Mom and Dad follow you around the world by putting little pins in the map on the wall in his office? They think it's so great, what you're doing. I do too. There are days when I would give anything to switch places with you. It's like you never had to grow up.”

Juliet's voice was beyond bitter, and though Cara had a million things that she would've loved to say, she said nothing. Cara wished she could tell Juliet about the sense of dread she felt when she thought there was something actually wrong with Ava, but she couldn't find the words.

“You know, they all think it's me,” Juliet said. “They think I'm the problem. Hell, I do too. I haven't been okay for a long time. Ava has no problem talking to any of them. But not me. Ava never says a word when I'm around.”

Cara thought about her own transatlantic conversations with Ava. They spoke once a week or so over the satellite phone when Ava was with her grandparents.

Juliet shook her head. “Mom calls it, 'the silly little game that Cara used to play.' It's driving me crazy. I was losing it before all this happened, but now...Ava's pediatrician says that more than likely, Ava's just reacting to the tension that apparently radiates off me. Can you imagine? I'm stressing out my own child to the point where she won't talk to me. I'm not cut out for this, Cara. I thought the kids would make everything perfect, and now I'm afraid that I've done something terrible. And poor Ava, it's like she knows.”

“Knows what?”

“I don't know. That I'm just going through the motions. That I'm faking it, and not very well.”

Juliet's voice was dull and bloodless. This wasn't the supremely confident sister that Cara had grown up with, the one who could get anything she wanted. Juliet had been the valedictorian who made Law Review and won big cases, not a haggard woman whose backseat was littered with spent juice boxes and pulverized Cheetos. Cara knew that

something had to give, and she didn't want that something to be Ava. Or Juliet, for that matter.

“You need to get out of here. Have you thought about taking a break?”

“I think about it every day. I dream about waking up, getting in the car, and just driving off. Escaping. But I don't think that's allowed.” Juliet rubbed her pale forehead and sighed. “I have to check on Ava.”

Before she what she was doing, Cara stood up. “I'll do it.”

Cara didn't go inside the house. She stood on the other side of the sliding glass door that looked into the family room and watched Ava. The girl, with her white-blond hair and delicate teeth, was close, sprawled across an over-sized pink-and-white striped beach towel decorated with bright green alligators. She wore a lime-colored fairy costume and was completely absorbed in the sparkling dresses papering the best-dressed issue of a magazine that Cara had gotten at the airport. Hesitantly, Cara tapped on the glass. Ava looked up at her and smiled. Cara waved.

A few minutes later, Cara rejoined Juliet under the tattered umbrella. The light show reached a crescendo and color battered the gray sky. The breeze was picking up, and through the lingering scent of smoke, Cara could smell the afternoon rain coming in off the Gulf.

“You should go,” Cara said.

For a moment Juliet didn't say anything, but when she spoke Cara heard the hope in her voice. “I can't burden Mom and Dad like that. And I've already put Dave through so much.”

“They'll manage. And I'll stay for a while.”

“You will?”

“Don't act surprised. You're not surprised.”

“What about Jason?” Juliet asked.

“I don't know. Maybe he'll stay too.”

Juliet said nothing. She looked down at her lap for a few minutes, and then up at Cara. The look on her face spoke of anxiety and relief. “You can't have them forever. Don't let them fall in love with you. I don't want Ava to look at you and see anything more than her Aunt Cara, do you understand? I know how much you love her, but... I'll want this life back. And then you can go back to Tai Pei or Timbuktu or wherever it is you run off to. Right?”

Cara didn't think. “Yes. Of course.”

Juliet smiled, deepening the thin lines at the corners of her eyes. “Where will I go?”

“Anywhere.” Cara smiled. “Go someplace I've never been.”

Cara thought of her Wanderers, and in that moment they seemed to belong to another life. An exciting life, a rich life, but one that somehow belonged to someone else.

“You know the postcards you send me? I have all of them.”

Cara smiled. She'd sent her sister a postcard from every country she'd ever been to. “So pick one, and go there.”

The gesture was not altruistic, and Cara wondered to what degree her sister knew that, or even cared. Cara felt like she was getting away with something. A feeling gained momentum within her, one that she had whenever she traveled to someplace she'd never been before.