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Bring everyone back alive.
The first rule of working a tour boat in the Caribbean is pretty damn simple.

I thought following that rule was going to be an easy task today.

I stood on the back deck of the charter boat I work as first mate, sipping a fizzy Diet Coke. The sun was warm on my face, and the clear blue water of the British Virgin Islands lapped invitingly around the swim platform.

We had reached the quietest point in my twelve-hour day. The captain had nosed the 50' white whale of a powerboat to a mooring, where I tied her up. I passed out snorkel gear, and my guests, adults of all shapes and sizes with a sprinkling of kids, scattered to explore Diamond Reef.

The reef had supposedly gotten its name when a woman got pissed at her fiancé and pitched her huge diamond engagement ring into the water. Of course, the ring has never been found. Cue mysterious music.

Who knows if the story is true? It's dubious, but it's also fun to tell. I get to make my most theatrically enigmatic face at the end of the tale. Although, for the record, I do cringe inwardly when Larry, one of the other captains I work with, layers on a joke about maritime law requiring that you split all findings with the crew. Hilarious.

Putting up with captains' humor. It was all part of this glamorous gig.

Now all I had to do was make sure that no one died. Oh, and stop obsessing over Dave—also known as “the guy who's not my boyfriend”—and why he'd been such an ass last night.

It sounded so simple.

The family of four from Texas had found a sting ray. Mom had gotten in the water without one word about smearing her makeup—and there was a lot of it. The male halves of the two couples from San Diego sat on the back deck dangling their feet in the water, their sculpted shoulders flexing as they lifted their cans of Heineken to their mouths. Their girlfriends—only one of whom was California blonde, thank you very much—snorkeled to my left, their tanned and toned derrieres floating primly above the surface. A few more guests lay scattered across the boat's cushioned benches like seals on the beach. The rest floated calmly in front of me, snorkels peeking out of the water, fins flapping lazily.

It had been a good day so far. Uneventful, in other words. No one had gotten themselves lost during my tour of the Baths on Virgin Gorda. You'd be surprised how many people separate themselves from the group while meandering through the house-sized granite boulders. Enough to give me a few mild heart attacks, for sure.

Next, all twenty-two of our guests received the cocktails and entrees they ordered at the restaurant on Marina Cay, which was not always a given. The island-style service on Marina Cay was alternately delightful and frustrating. We'd caught them on a good day.

Then, I'd solicited a few oohs and aahs by pointing out the photos of Sidney Poitier on the walls. His movie, *Our Virgin Island*, was based on the story of the couple who had owned the tiny island for a time.

And, as of this very moment, I still hadn't broken that first golden rule. All twenty-two guests were alive and well. Several of them were even starting to develop a nice afternoon buzz from our open bar.

It was going to be easy to bring this group back to the United States Virgin Islands intact—and hopefully happy enough to tip us well.

But as I scanned back across the reef, I saw something that made my breath catch: a set of bamboo pole arms flailing above the water line. They conveyed the universal gesture that translated as, "This snorkeling may turn out to be the last thing that I do."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

All the safety training around scenarios like this urges you to stay calm above all. I set my Diet Coke down gently on the gunwale. To be honest, I wanted to chuck it behind me with a scream and dive into the water like a pig on fire. Instead, I settled for a calm call to the captain as I gathered my fins, mask and snorkel.

My heart, however, didn't get the memo. It thumped in my chest, its pace and strength increasing with a second sighting. The arms—and the person attached to them—were making a beeline for the exact place we'd told them NOT to go: the edge of the reef. There, a sly current was waiting to give the owner a fast-paced tour of the shoreline of Great

Camanoe Island.

Pretty soon, my guest would be headed straight for the open Atlantic, if he could stay afloat long enough. If he happened to hit the tiny coral atoll of Anegada twenty miles away, he'd be lucky because the next thing he'd hit would be Bermuda, more than 900 miles north.

Realistically, though, the prevailing currents would likely drag him west, which is where we were headed in about half an hour. If he could just keep his head up, maybe we could pick him up along the way. Or throw a life ring over the side and drag him to our final stop, the island of Jost van Dyke, population 297.

Flippant thoughts while someone was drowning, I know, but that's just a taste of the way my sick mind works.

My name's Elizabeth Bower Jordan, by the way. Most people—including my drowning victim—know me as Lizzie.

I've never rescued a soul, but being a first mate on a tour boat requires you to play a lot of different roles—bartender, boat hand, psychologist, mediator, cruise director, bloodhound, psychic, DJ. You've just gotta run with whatever the day throws at you.

I fumbled to free my fins from the rubber band that bound them together. As my fingers flopped, my mind raced. Those long skinny old man arms could only belong to Herb, the septuagenarian from southern Connecticut whose life was about to be cut much shorter than even he imagined.

I jumped as a bright orange life ring appeared in my field of vision. I grabbed at it, my hand closing over the stiff foam in a death grip. I looked up at the captain on the other end, Ben.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked. Like the guys from San Diego, Ben was easy on the eyes, with blonde hair, blue eyes and white teeth that flashed frequently in his tanned face. A dimple on his chin and a slightly upturned nose gave his face a lighthearted look, bolstered by the fact that Ben was rarely serious. Even now, with one of our passengers fighting for his life, he was grinning at me, daring me to be scared.

Instead, I scowled at him. "Am I going to be okay? I wasn't aware there was a choice."

Ben opened his mouth to respond, but he got cut off.

"There's a man out there!" a female voice behind him exclaimed.

Aw, crap. Now the boat was going to be in on it. There's nothing like having an audience for your first ocean rescue.

Ben held up a hand to me, indicating that he'd deal with it. I can only imagine how he planned to explain that I was the captain of the rescue squad, as improbable as it seemed.

However, I knew he'd have that woman completely wrapped around his tan little pinky by the time I returned. Ben had a way with women.

He had a way of scorning them, too, but I had bigger things on my radar at the moment.

I was as ready as I'd ever be. I shuffled to the edge of the deck in my fins, pulled a mask over my face, threw the life ring off the back deck and stepped off.

The water wrapped my sun-warmed body in an chilly embrace, but I shook it off. I checked the location of Herb's arms, taking in a sharp breath as I noticed they were considerably lower in the water. I took off, scissor-kicking my legs furiously.

Even though I was cruising right over one of my favorite reefs in the British Virgin Islands, I didn't see the vivid green and pink parrotfish, their teeth scraping on the hard coral, or the school of twenty-five navy blue tang attacking an outcropping of algae or even the long, torpedo-shaped gray barracuda making slow circles through the reef, sending all of the little fish scattering into their nooks and crannies.

All I saw was the face of Herb's daughter, Lynn. She reminded me of Mrs. Lemon, my college roommate's mom. She was tall and thin with pale pink, freckled skin and short strawberry blonde hair. Lynn kept hers out of her face with a sensible haircut that framed kind green eyes couched in fine, elegant wrinkles.

I've noticed that people transform into two shapes as they age. They either acquire padding in strange places until they resemble a bean bag chair or continue to shed flesh until they resemble some variety of bird. Like her father, Lynn was on her way to becoming a stork. And not an unattractive one for her age.

On our way up to Virgin Gorda that morning, Lynn told me she'd brought Herb to St. Thomas because he used to love boats, but he'd been slowly making his world smaller and smaller since he hit his late seventies. She thought it might be one of their last vacations together. She wanted this one to be special.

The jury's still out on "special," but I'd bet today's entire trip that it would be unforgettable.

I took another sighting to locate Herb. I could see his arms cresting above the waterline, but just barely. I felt my breath catch in my throat. I kicked harder and faster.

My quads were starting to burn. I ignored them. I'd been conserving a little energy in case Herb proved to be a fighter. Right after they tell you to remain calm in an emergency, your rescue instructors will tell you that drowning victims will drown you if you're not smart about how you approach them. And then they remind you how important it is to remain calm. Helpful, that.

Considering Herb wanted to argue with just about every pirate story I told that morning—it was a first for me to have a guest raise his hand for Q&A as I was enthusiastically relaying the outrageous tale about the fisherman who found enough pirate gold in a cave to buy his own island—I figured he wouldn't be an easy rescue. I'd probably have to grab him hard. I felt a little flourish of sadistic pleasure at the thought.

I took another look at Herb, his face now completely underwater. However, I was heartened by the fact that his mask and snorkel were still on. Some people panic and tear their mask off in a desperate bid for oxygen. Chalk one up for Herbie.

I squinted through my mask. Had he gone horizontal in the water? Was he trying to float? He was kicking up a lot of whitewater, making it difficult to see exactly what he was doing. I'd have to just wing it. Wait—it looked like he was moving toward me. This complicated things.

I planned to go in life ring first, to see if he'd grab onto it. That would make my job easy. It would also keep him from closing bony claws on my shoulders, shoving me down to boost his own body upward, ducking me underwater in the process. I felt my shoulders tense as I prepared.

He looked even closer now. Was I seeing things? I'd have to get the life ring between us quickly before he shoved me below the surface—

I jerked upright as I realized he was too close for me to wedge the ring between us. I lifted my head out of the water, ready to fend him off. I had a life ring, and I was prepared to use it to save my life, as well as his.

But instead of trying to use my body as a rescue raft, Herb stopped short, pulled his head out of the water and let the snorkel drop from his mouth. "Is it time to come in?" he asked, his yellow teeth gritting between thin lips as he kicked to stay above the surface.

I was struck speechless.

Herb took this either as a sign of deafness or idiocy. He tapped his wrist with two gnarled arthritic fingers covered in brown liver spots. "What. Time. Is. It?" he asked in a booming voice that I was sure scared all of the fish off the reef below. Then I flinched as he brought his bony arms out of the water the way he had when I saw him on the boat, crossing them once over his head, then bringing them back down into the water. He bobbed as he did it, and I realized that the man was treading water.

Treading water. The man wasn't drowning. He was treading water.

It was all I could do to look at my own wrist and say, "2:30. Time to come in."

He nodded once, then put his head down and went horizontal again. His limbs started thrashing, and I thought for sure he was going to go down. I put my face in the water and

realized that the man was just . . . swimming. And fast.

As I watched Herb's arms flail him back to the boat, I felt the energy drain from my body. I wanted to throw myself on the mercy of the life ring and rest. And I wanted a drink, preferably poured right down my snorkel.

However, a glance behind me revealed that I was drifting closer to the rip current at the edge of the island. I'd be the one in need of rescuing if I didn't start back for the boat, stat.

I maneuvered the life ring between the boat and me, then put my head down and started to kick. I cursed through my snorkel the whole way, my legs protesting and my lungs wheezing.

I arrived back at the boat bedraggled and irritable. Herb sat on one of the teal cushions on the back deck, his thin silver hair neatly slicked back, a green towel draped over his neck like a prizefighter. He was working on another Painkiller, our signature cocktail and a delightful blend of orange juice, pineapple juice, cream of coconut and plenty of rum. It was his fourth of the day if I was counting right. And here I was, looking like the creature from the black lagoon, breathing hard, face flushed, my auburn locks lying in hanks around my face, darkened to a dull brown by the salt water. At least my bikini was intact, which wasn't always a given.

My nerves were shot, so when a warm hand landed on my shoulder, I jumped like I'd been burned.

Lynn's face swam into view. "Thank you," she said. "He used to be a champion long-distance swimmer, but he hasn't swum like that in years. It was sweet of you to go out to him." She beamed at me, revealing a set of ever-so-slightly-buck teeth. Then she joined Herb on the cushion.

I just stared dully at them, my vision going in and out of focus, my hands and legs shaky from adrenaline and exertion. Had she seen him give the universal "help" gesture? Did she think I'd just casually stroked out there to share a sweet moment with Herb?

Later, this would all be hilarious. Or, at least, I sure as hell hoped so.

"Fresh water?" Ben said, the green nozzle of the hose in his hands. He was also in perfect array, his blue polo shirt tucked neatly into a pair of khaki shorts, his hair gently tousled.

I glared at him. He sprayed me, right in the face.

In case you've never worked on a boat, I'll let you in on a little secret. In addition to cheesy jokes, this is one of the things captains think are funny.

And I'll let you in on one other secret that most captains don't seem to know—or appreciate: Their mates rarely agree.

INTO THE BLUE

“Better?” he asked once the stream had stopped, the corners of his mouth tight with amusement. He knew better than to laugh outright. I think I would have charged him like a bull.

But, if nothing else, I was a professional. I stood stock still and gave him the best dead fish eye I could, then collected my strewn clothing from the back deck and vowed to get him back later.

And I vowed to have a drink that night after work.

Make that lots of drinks.

2

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll tell you that I rarely needed an excuse to head up to Island Time Pub after work.

You couldn't beat the location—or the view. It was perched right over one of the busiest harbors on the island, open to the balmy Caribbean air and gentle trade wind breezes. It also offered a perfect view of the second Virgin Island of St. John, barely four miles away, right across Pillsbury Sound. In fact, St. John was so close that you could see its weather patterns and, in turn, know exactly what was headed for you. When St. John completely disappeared behind a rain storm, you knew it was time to move away from the balcony rail or prepare for a good soaking.

In better weather, the rail offered you the chance to watch boats of all sizes return to harbor for the evening. You might be treated to the sight of a small powerboat returning with sunburned day trippers dancing drunken circles in their bathing suits around the captain as Jimmy Buffett blared; a weathered inflatable dinghy bearing a family of four back to shore after a day of monohull sailing to St. John, the father often in a khaki Columbia fishing shirt/hat combo—and sometimes the wife, too; a fishing boat in pristine condition, its stainless gleaming even after a day at sea, its tall tuna tower bearing the little flags that report their marlin catches for the day and its crew tanned to a caramel crisp and ready for that night's dose of Jägermeister.

It all made for a very satisfying close to the day, especially with a cold beer in one's hand, preferably a Presidente.

Although the company at the bar wasn't nearly as breathtaking as the view, it was at

least familiar. I saw the same faces at Island Time that I waved to out on the water, each with their own shade of tan betraying how often they'd been working lately.

Island Time was the place where the day's "yachting for dollars" stories got exchanged: whose boat hit the bottom in the shallows at Foxy's that day, who tied up their boat like a total idiot ("If you don't know how to tie knots, tie lots.") and who had taken bikini models/Playboy bunnies/hot cougar moms out for the day.

That sundowner beer was all I thought about as I cleaned the boat that night, especially when I checked my phone and saw no messages from Dave. I shook my head. It wasn't like him, but maybe I didn't know him as well as I thought I did.

Ben and I divvied up the cash from that day—\$200 each, not bad—but it didn't improve my mood for the drive to Red Hook.

I was at Island Time often enough that Detroit Jake, the tall gangly bartender from (you guessed it) Detroit, poured an Absolut Citron and soda, splash of cranberry, as soon as he saw me crest the top of the stairs.

Detroit Jake wasn't alone in his nickname. We don't do last names down here. We do occupations or affectations. In addition to Detroit Jake, we have Scuba Steve, Franklyn the Mechanic, Crash . . . the list goes on. I'm usually Redheaded Lizzie or Boatie Lizzie on my good days. On my bad days, I don't want to know what they call me.

iPhones and Facebook were changing that to some degree, but everything moves on island time down here, even change.

"The look on your face," Jake said as he squeezed a lime wedge into my drink, "told me that it's not a Presidente kind of day." He pushed it toward me with \long, spindly fingers.

Jake looked like he'd been stretched on a rack when he was shaped, his face long and gaunt no matter how many slices of pizza he ate from the kitchen, leaving his poor ears flapping out in the breeze. His skinny hips and bony butt hid under baggy cargo shorts, which always looked dangerously close to falling right off him. Like many of the bartenders on the island, his complexion remained a pale white from too many hours behind a bar and too few in the Caribbean sunshine.

He smiled at me. "Besides, a hero like you deserves a drink." His blue eyes sparkled.

I paused for a second, my straw an inch from my lips. There was no way they could already know about today.

Could they?

This was St. Thomas. Of course they could. The coconut telegraph, that informal person-to-person game of telephone which made everyone's private business public, was the fastest, most efficient thing on this island.

I dropped my head back and groaned. “How the hell did you hear about that? It’s only 6:03.”

He tilted his head toward a blue-shirted captain who was wearing the same outfit Ben had been wearing earlier, although he wore it a few sizes larger. I figured he also probably had to adjust his hat nightly to accommodate his ego, which was also constantly expanding.

He called himself Cappy. God knows what his real name was. When his boat guests would ask whether that was short for “Captain,” he’d always reply with, “Well, it ain’t the name I was born with!” Then he would laugh a huge belly laugh and slap his knee. That was Cappy, always full of non-sequiturs that he thought were hilarious but left everyone else puzzled.

Cappy was one of the many white boat captains who moved down from the continental U.S. to live in St. Thomas, as was Ben. On the boats we worked, there were only a few Virgin Islanders at the helm. By the way—and contrary to popular belief—arriving on island with an intention to stay didn’t make you an instant Virgin Islander. Being “bahn here” pretty much did.

That said, those who were born on St. Thomas descended from people who arrived to these islands in all kinds of different ways. Some were the ancestors of Africans who had been brought to this island as slaves. Some were the children of people who moved from other Caribbean nations like St. Lucia, St. Barths and Dominica, while still other families arrived from elsewhere, with the U.S. and Europe leading the charge. On St. Thomas, I knew white people who were born on the island and black people from Texas. The island was a major intersection point for folks from all over, and if you wanted to know where someone was from, you had to ask. It made for interesting bar stool chatter, if you’re into that sort of thing. (Which I happen to be.)

“I’ll save you!” Cappy’s poor imitation of what I could only assume was my voice dragged me back to Island Time. Then he looked at his buddies and laughed that laugh. He thought he was so hilarious—even more so after a few cocktails. His moon-shaped face was even ruddier than usual with glee.

I glared at him.

He continued with absolutely no regard for my mood. “Might want to read that article that’s going around about how drowning don’t look like you think. Might save you some trouble next time.”

I opened my mouth to make a sharp reply, but I felt a tap on my shoulder. I spun around and barked, “What?!?” into the face of the person who had touched me.

It was Ben. Jesus Christ, hadn't he done enough today?

"I gotta talk to you," he said, white knuckling his iPhone in his right hand while his other hand reached for a Heineken that Jake already had on the bar.

I jerked my thumb over at Cappy. "Sounds like you've talked enough today."

He looked over my shoulder, his eyes squinting. I took it as a sign of guilt. "Yeah, sorry."

"It's not like he needs more ammunition to give me a hard time."

He suddenly looked thoughtful. "Hey, how much did you give that old guy to drink today?"

"You mean Herb?" I took a hard hit of my drink and arched an eyebrow at him. "I didn't overdo it. You know some of the girls like to put an extra bottle in the mix, but I actually follow the recipe."

"One of your rules?"

"I just hate dealing with drunks," I said, staring at his beer.

He smirked at me and I could see his mouth start to open with a new retort. It shut quickly. Then I saw a small furrow appear between his sun-bleached eyebrows. "I really need to talk," he said.

I held back my most sarcastic reply. I needed to get better about that. Maturity and all. Preserving work relationships as sacred.

And, truly, it wasn't that I didn't like Ben. We were friends, and he was one of the captains I enjoyed working with. But there was no way I would ever tell him so. It would jack up his ego to ungodly levels. But I could make a small concession here.

I flipped my hand over, palm up. *Go ahead.*

"I met this girl two nights ago—"

I groaned. "Really? It's bad enough when I have to listen to the tourist-of-the-week story when I'm being paid to work with you. At the bar, it's strictly leisure time for me." I held up my pointer finger. "Actually, wait, when you start dating a girl who doesn't already have a ticket out of here, then—and only then—will I be your Dear Abby."

Ben put a hand on my shoulder. "Trust me, this is different."

I rolled my eyes and looked pointedly at his hand. "What, because you're in loooooove? Does she have a ticket, or doesn't she?"

But before I could fire off another one, Ben's hand dropped listlessly off my shoulder, and I saw something change in his eyes. Maybe it was sincerity, or maybe I caught a glimpse of what all those girls were chasing: sad blue eyes under knitted eyebrows set against tanned skin. A sensitive man against the elements, tough on the outside,

marshmallowy on the inside.

Barf.

Still, I let him continue.

Whatever overtook me, I just want to say this: I wish I could take it back and keep this whole mess from happening.

Instead, I actually *asked* him to continue. Big mistake.

Ben brightened considerably at the prospect of pouring his sad little heart out to me. “I met this girl at Duffy’s yesterday. Andrea.”

I groaned.

“No, no, no, wait,” he said.

“Mmm-hmmm?”

“She was with her friends, visiting from D.C.”

I waved my right hand in a circle impatiently. This was still sounding like the conquest stories of the old Ben.

“We were dancing, having fun, you know, and then I said, ‘Let’s go to XO so we can do something a little quieter.’ She said okay, so we went in and had a drink. I asked her to come home with me—”

“The vomit is rising in the back of my throat.”

“Lizzie.”

“Get to the point.”

“She went back over to Duffy’s to tell her friends that she was coming home with me, and she never came back.”

I waited for him to continue, but he just stood there and took another swig of his Heineken.

“Okay, so some girl ditched you at Duffy’s. I’m sure rejection like that is hard for a stud like you. And . . . ?”

“I knew she was at the Ritz. I asked one of the towel guys on the beach to look for her today, just to make sure she was okay.”

“You mean, ‘just to stalk her,’ right?”

“Lizzie.”

“My patience is wearing thin.” I sucked the last of my drink through the straw. I shook the plastic cup—affectionately known on the island as “Caribbean crystal”—at him. “And my drink is empty. We’re at a delicate juncture.”

He sighed, then grabbed the cup out of my hand. He upended his Heineken to finish it—in sympathy, I supposed—and nodded his head at Detroit Jake.

While Jake poured, I pulled out my phone, a laughably old, scarred pink Motorola Razr that belonged in a flip phone museum, and scrolled to the name “Dave.” I cast a glance over at Ben to see if he was observing my texting, as he often did.

But he was staring over at St. John, lost in thought. That was a first.

My thumbs paused over the keypad for a second. Then, I dashed out a message: *What are you up to tonight?* I slammed my phone shut just in time to accept a new cocktail with my right hand.

Ben gave me a look. “Got better things to do?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

“Will you just *listen?*”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” I said as I sucked straight citrus vodka through the straw. I was having trouble finding the club soda or the cranberry juice in my drink. Apparently, Jake thought I was looking for a drink that packed a punch.

“So my friend at the Ritz saw her friends. Just the two of them on the beach today. No Andrea.”

“So she went home with someone else and you’re jealous.” I shrugged.

He reached out and grabbed my shoulder hard. “Lizzie. He went and talked to them. They said she went home with me.”

His grip tightened, and I knocked his hand away. “You’re hurting me,” I said. I took a step back, my body tensing like a runner at the starting line.

He raised his hand in apology. “I’m sorry, Lizzie. I’m sorry. I’m freaking out.”

I took a breath. My heart was pounding, but, with some effort, I refocused my gaze. This was just Ben. He didn’t mean anything by it. But knowing what he knew about me, he should be more careful.

He read me quickly. “Lizzie, I’m sorry. Please. You’re the only person I can talk to about this.”

I took a deep breath. *You’re fine, Lizzie. You’re with Ben. You’re in St. Thomas.* I felt my heart slow again, and I resumed my place at the bar. However, I left a few extra inches between us.

I set my drink down on a coaster that Jake had so thoughtfully left for me. “So let me get this straight. This girl—”

“Andrea.”

“Andrea. Her friends thought she went with you, and you thought she went with them.”

He nodded.

"So no one knows where she is."

He nodded again.

"What did your towel guy say to them?"

"Nothing more than shooting the shit about their night. He told me he played it cool."

I rubbed my forehead with my left hand, willing my brain to think faster. The hamsters running the wheels in there were hitting the hard stuff right along with me. "Wait, her friends just left her and went home?"

"Because they thought she went home with me."

"Some friends."

"Lizzie, this was yesterday, and she still hasn't turned up."

"As far as you know."

"As far as I know."

"Ben, it's, what, twenty paces from XO to Duffy's? And how many people are there in the parking lot on any given night? There's always a crowd of spectators, leaning on cars and watching the action. It's not as though someone can just disappear against her will with no one noticing. My guess is that she ditched you."

He leaned forward, closing the distance between us, giving me a chance to look at his face in extreme close-up. He really was classically good-looking, although he did have a small scar on his upper lip. A car accident, if I remembered correctly. I think he told girls he got it on a motorcycle. He also had a couple of broken blood vessels in his right cheek that I'd never noticed before.

Even so, it was an earnest face that lacked for nothing in the charm department. The only flaw I saw in Ben—well, okay, besides the whole gunning-for-tourists thing—was that he could be a little too slick for his own good. When you watch the same smooth act day in and day out, it can get tiresome. I willed myself not to fall for it.

"Something's not right, Lizzie," he said. "Maybe I'm wrong. But if I'm not, you know this is all going to fall on me."

"Ben, come on. People don't disappear down here. This island is too small."

"Aruba. Natalee Holloway."

"If you're telling me that you're some kind of Joran van der Sloot, I don't want to know."

"Be serious. That wasn't that long ago."

"I am. Look, I'm sorry. What else can I say? It's probably just some big misunderstanding." I blinked twice. I could feel the top part of my head start to feel light. The vodka was talking to me now.

“Do me a favor?”

I lifted my eyebrows, but I didn't say anything.

“Go over there, and see if she's okay.”

“What? No.”

“I just need to know what I'm dealing with. Maybe she met someone else in the parking lot and went home with him, instead of me. Maybe she's rolling up to the Ritz right now with bed head from shacking up with him. Or maybe she's hiding out at the hotel, avoiding me. But I need to know because if she's not back, this is going to get bad fast. You know how the cops are down here.”

“Why me? Why not just do it yourself?”

“I'd just make it worse.”

“You know my rule. I don't get involved.” I lifted my glass as though to toast him. “I just drink my drinks and go home. It's the only way to be, and I should know.” My tone was light, but I felt my stomach do a little somersault, remembering the last time I decided to take a stand. It didn't end well.

His eyebrows came together and rose up like a pair of praying hands. “I just need you to take a quick look. Get a lay of the land. Maybe ask some questions. You're good with people, even though you like to fake like you're not.” I scowled at him. This was flattery of the baldest kind. I'd like to believe it was true, but this was *Ben* who was talking. The man would say anything to a woman to get what he wanted. “Besides,” he continued, “you're a girl. They'll open up to you.”

“You're laying it on kind of thick.”

“What about that time I helped you move? You told me two trips, max, and I spent all day moving your shit.”

“That not the same thing at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“We're talking about a missing girl, not team-lifting a crappy futon. Besides, I can't go, not in the state I'm about to be in.”

He exhaled slowly. “Tomorrow morning. Bar tab with your name on it here at the end of the day. Just go and see if she's all right and report back. That's it.” He checked his watch and tipped his Heineken up again. “I gotta go.”

“If I were you, I'd probably head home, if this this week's track record is any indicator.”

I heard a voice pipe up behind me. “He's coming to El Cubano with me to play some pool. You wanna come?” Cappy appeared on my left, just a little too close for comfort. Personal space wasn't a field in which he excelled.

"There are so many things wrong with that sentence."

Cappy laughed that laugh again. I had to hand it to the man. He almost never took my barbs personally. He mock saluted at Ben before starting toward the stairs to the garage. "See you there, chief."

Cappy paused at the top of the stairs and pointed a finger at me. "I'll send you that article. Gotta know what drowning people look like. Safety first!" He tipped his cap and laughed again. I sighed.

I reached out an arm to stop Ben before he followed Cappy like an eager puppy. "Ben, I don't know about this."

"El Cubano? We go there all the time."

I sighed. "No, these girls. Me going to the Ritz. I can't make any promises."

"Just think about it, Lizzie. Proof of life. Maybe a couple of questions, if you feel like turning on your Lizzie charm. That's it."

I took one more sip of my drink to buy me some time. "No promises," I finally said. It was the best I could come up with.

He nodded once, but I could see the disappointment in his face.

"Just one more question, though," I said.

His eyebrows popped. "Nice move, Columbo. About Andrea?"

I shook my head. "No, no, no. Is 'playing pool' a euphemism for paying one of the ladies at El Cubano to make your night?"

He rolled his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. I really want to know what you guys do there. You say you just smoke cigars and shoot pool, but do you really need a bordello for a venue?"

"Best pool tables on island. Plus, Cappy always has Cubans. Nothing like a Cuban. Let me know what you find out."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he started to walk away.

"I'm texting you their hotel info," he said, and then he was gone before I could get in another word.

I leaned against the bar and drained the rest of my drink. Now it was my turn to stare at St. John and chew on everything Ben had told me. The music and the chatter were getting steadily louder around me, but I only noticed it in passing. My phone buzzed, and I jumped.

It was Ben, texting me the girls' room number.

I wondered briefly how he'd gotten it. *Ben's got friends all over the island*, I grumbled to myself.

I dialed into work to see if they needed me tomorrow. I felt a little trickle of anxiety in my chest. I'd managed to piss off the boat's owner after miscounting how many small souvenir T-shirts we had on the boat last week. They made a ton of money selling those things, so losing one was pretty much a felony in our world. She kept reminding me of my offense by skipping me in the work rotation. She'd allowed me to work today, though, so maybe I'd finally gotten out of first mate jail.

There was also a big part of me that wanted an excuse to avoid getting tangled in Ben's business.

I could already hear myself saying the words to him. "Sorry, man, I have to work." He would understand. It was the golden excuse down here. An extra shift meant extra money, and pretty much everyone needed money. Plus, when the owner gods offered you work, you took it, lest you anger them and find yourself seriously underemployed, as I had the last few days.

As the office manager cheerily told me I had the day off, the trickle did a little dance in my chest. I'd made rent for the month, but just barely. And my next credit card payment was coming up fast. Another shift on the boat would have really helped.

Finances aside, it looked like Ben's errand had bounced back in my court. That look on his face when I'd refused to commit hit me right in the guilty bone, one I hadn't really even realized I had before tonight.

I shook the ice in my drink, trying to dislodge a few extra molecules of vodka. I had the whole day tomorrow to either do Ben a solid or feel guilty about letting him down. I tried to look for a silver lining, something I hadn't really known how to do before I got here. Maybe playing Nancy Drew would suit me. It certainly was starting to feel like I'd worn out my welcome on the boat, at least where the owner was concerned.

A detective, I scoffed. I hated it when people poked into my business, but I'd always been a bit of a snoop, if I was honest about it. When I walked by a house with wide-open windows, you can bet I snuck a peek to see what my fellow humans were up to.

People also had a tendency to spill their secrets to me, either on the barstool or on the boat. I didn't know whether it was my face or my willingness to listen to the completely outrageous with nothing more than an affirmative murmur and a blank face. Or maybe it was the booze.

Someone slammed a can of beer down on the bar, and it brought me back to the bar. I cast a glance around and saw no real excuse to stick around.

I checked my own state of sobriety. The first drink had started to work on me, but the second cup of vodka was still humming in the distance, like a faraway freight train. I

wanted to get home before it flattened me to the rails.

“How much do I owe you, Jake?” I asked as he passed by. He waved a hand in my direction, either meaning he'd decided to comp me or that he'd put my drinks on Ben's tab. I was a happy girl either way. I left a five on the bar for him, then headed down to the basement to retrieve the death trap I call a car.

The Suzuki was only ten years old, but it looked at least twenty. The body was dented on most of the panels as though it had been attacked by a crew of men wielding sledgehammers. All the gloss of the clear coat had weathered away by the sun and salt air, and the white body paint was peeling around the edges. The front right wheel threatened to fall off at any minute. Or, at least, that's how it looked to me, although my mechanic, Garfield, laughed at me when I told him so. Soon come, but not yet—or so he said.

My little Suzuki ran well, though, as long as I put a gallon of water into it at least once a month. Must have been a radiator leak somewhere, but who has the patience to track those things down? Oh, and I really had to stomp on the brakes to get her to stop. But that didn't matter. On this island, you rarely got up above thirty miles an hour.

I got in and fastened my seatbelt because that's what mattered down here. Go ahead and chat on your cell phone. And, if you're thirsty, drink a beer. Just make sure you've got your seatbelt on because they'll ticket you for that.

I guided my car slowly out of the marina parking lot, dodging a herd of fisherman in their white, long-sleeved T-shirts.

I paused at the top of the driveway. The road home was left. The road to El Cubano was right, although I imagined I'd never set foot in there.

Another option sat straight in front of me: the graded driveway that led to the parking lot that housed Duffy's Love Shack, the scene of the girl's supposed disappearance.

Andrea, I reminded myself. *She has a name.*

That vodka freight train in my veins blew its whistle, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I needed to get off the road. But something compelled me to take a quick ride through the parking lot. I'm not sure if I was expecting Andrea to jump out and throw herself on my windshield, but I guess my curiosity got the better of me.

I coaxed my car up the steep grade, whose scarred blacktop told the tales of other cars who'd previously scratched their way to the summit.

The shopping center at the top of the driveway was a white concrete slab strip mall that would have looked at home in any 1980s American suburb.

By day, it bustled with people going in and out of the insurance agency, bank and homegrown mail center (because you certainly didn't want to suffer the official USPS down

here if you didn't have to).

By night, its two bars dominated. At the end of the strip sat XO, the wine and martini bar where Ben and Andrea had their final drink. Smack dab in the middle of the parking lot, you'd find Duffy's, an open air tiki bar whose wooden tables and plastic lawn chairs sat directly on the black pavement.

It was still early, only 6:30 or so. By the time the dark rolled in, Duffy's would be pulsing with everything from Jimmy Buffett to the latest Rihanna hit, the tables crowded with tourists and a particular kind of man prowling around. Mostly the kind who liked watching young girls dance—the dirty old man crowd repackaged for Caribbean habitation.

I was also pretty sure the parking lot was a thinly disguised open air drug market, with pot the most likely drug of choice. Pot and drugs of any kind were not a part of my world anymore. No exceptions.

Well, alcohol was the exception, but that was different, in my book. Another one of my “little rules,” I guess.

I rolled through the parking lot slowly, my gaze slipping over faces that ran the gamut of hues—just-got-off-the-plane white, dark brown with a copper cast, formerly white but sunburned to a crisp, light yellow-brown and dark, rich umber. I lifted a few fingers off the steering wheel to those I recognized.

There were plenty I didn't. If you worked on a boat out of the East End, I'd know you by sight, if not by name, and you'd probably get a finger wave. Boater's rules apply even on land, as far as I was concerned. But I rarely hung out with the people who lived and worked around the capital of Charlotte Amalie, just a few miles away. They were much more likely to catch a drink at Betsy's in Frenchtown or Sib's, rather than traveling all the way to Red Hook. St. Thomas was small town life made even smaller by the bizarre way that people stuck close to home.

As I drove, I scanned the sixty feet between Duffy's dance floor and the tinted door that led to XO. *Where did you go, girl?*

Nothing popped out at me. To the left, I saw the usual row of cars parked head-in with two shiny taxi vans blocking them in, waiting for tourists to stumble out and head back to their resorts. To the right, two white girls in tank tops and shorts were standing outside the XO door. (Insider tip: it looks like a “push” door, but it's really a “pull.”) They glanced at me as I cruised by. I was tempted to pull over and ask them if they'd been around last night, but I kept moving.

Then the strip mall ended with a Banco Popular ATM, followed by a dumpster and

three secluded parking spots, sometimes four if people were feeling bold enough to crowd the dumpster.

I found myself at the road. I paused. Should I go back and talk to those girls?

The vodka must be getting the better of me. Who did I think I was, Kojak? I hadn't even decided if I was going to do Ben's little errand tomorrow. And, besides, as far as I knew, Andrea might even be home now, telling the tale of some wildly charming island man she met in the Duffy's parking lot who whisked her away for an evening she'd never forget.

I fervently wished it to be true. I hoped it was all some big misunderstanding, like I'd suggested to Ben. But there was a part of me, a cynical one maybe, or one born of experience, that couldn't quite get on board.

I decided to turn home, guiding my car to the left side of the road, the side we drive on down here. They say it has to do with donkey carts. I'm pretty sure there's some stubbornness involved, too. The stickers inside the rental cars say it best: Keep left. Honk often.

As I headed out of Red Hook, my mind was already working on an unflattering picture of Andrea's friends. I imagined them in those skintight dresses that look like ace bandages, their faces affected with an expression that was half boredom, half contempt.

"They just left without her," I murmured. I usually listened to the radio. I favored 104.3, the Buzz, but I wasn't in the mood for rock tonight. I drove in silence.

I passed a fruit and fish stand on the right, a rickety booth made mostly of plywood and 2x4s coated with purple and yellow paint that had faded to pastels under the Caribbean sun.

I caught a snatch of raucous laughter from a guy called the Red Man as I drove by. It sent a shiver up my spine. All I knew about him was that he sold fish, that his skin was a reddish brown under a crown of spiky bleached dreadlocks—hence his nickname—and that he said hello to me like he knew me intimately every time we passed each other down at the docks. He might have been the nicest man in the world. I didn't know. But his overly familiar greetings hinted that I didn't want to know him any better than I already did.

I took the left turn right after his shack. I shivered again as I merged onto the empty road.

I was musing about how odd it is to catch a chill in 80-degree weather when something flashed at the right side of my car, streaking about a foot or so in front of my hood. I slammed on the brakes and felt that damn right wheel lock on me. I gritted my teeth and hoped for the best as I felt the back end of my car skid around in a half circle and finally

shudder to a stop.

What the hell was that? My head swiveled from side to side. Nothing. My heart was banging against my chest. I had the whole road to myself. That was a good thing because my car was splayed across both lanes at an angle, pointing back toward Red Hook.

I flexed my hands on the steering wheel. My palms were wet. I took a deep breath and gauged my sobriety. Pretty okay—but I needed to get home as soon as I could.

I gripped the wheel with slick hands and gently tapped on the gas. The car shuddered forward. I gingerly coaxed the car into the left shoulder, made of packed dirt and stones, bordered by a wall of native Caribbean brush. I peered across the road and into the tangle. Because we use left-drive cars here, I was peering over the empty seat, then across the road. I couldn't see a thing.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Then I jumped out and headed for the bush. I wanted to know what flashed by my car.

I stood on the shoulder, looking into the vegetation. I hesitated. The brush was dense here since this land bordered the tiny St. Thomas National Park. I saw skinny trees mixed with squat bushes whose branches stretched wildly in just about every direction available to them. I couldn't see it, but experience told me that there was also some kind of plant with secret spines just waiting to wrap its tentacles around my leg.

I listened for thrashing in the brush, but I heard nothing. The sun goes down quickly here in what we refer to as a “cartoon sunset,” so it was getting hard to see more than a few feet ahead.

I realized my knees were shaking. I flexed my quads in a vain attempt to stop them, but the harder I flexed, the harder they knocked.

I heard a rustle and I jumped, but nothing appeared. I wrapped my arms around myself as the shakes extended to my entire body.

I opened my mouth. I thought I was going to say “hello?” but what came out was “Andrea?” There was no way whatever ran past my car could have been a person. Could it?

I took a few steps into the bush and hesitated. I thought I saw what looked like a small path amidst the tangle. At some point, it would probably become impassible—or I would simply end up with a leg full of stickers.

I took a step forward.

I heard a crackle ahead of me, and I froze.

“Andrea?” I whispered. Another crackle. I shivered again and tightened my arms around myself, my hands making the unpleasant discovery that my armpits were soaked. I still didn't release my aggressive hug.

What if I solved this problem right here and now through a piece of dumb luck? I imagined a girl emerging from the bush, her alabaster skin scratched and bruised, her dark hair in complete disarray, but otherwise fine. I noted that, in the absence of a picture of Andrea, she looked a little like Disney's Snow White in a sun dress. Maybe the seven Caribbean dwarves had been offering her shelter.

I took another step and called her name again—then I screamed as a doe plunged out into the open. It wheeled around in a mad turn, then bolted for the National Park and its mangroves.

I laughed manically, releasing my arms and covering my face with my hands. A deer. I had just been scared out of my mind by a deer.

Some detective I'd make. I rocked back and forth for a few minutes with nervous laughter, trying to catch my breath. The air felt thin and I was getting woozy. I sank to the ground, pulling my legs to my chest and feeling my heart pound against my thighs.

When I felt sure I wasn't going to pass out, I rose slowly to my feet and wiped my streaming eyes with the backs of my hands.

I reached the road as a beat-up maroon pickup rolled up on the opposite side of the street, next to my Suzuki. The driver, a white man with a weathered face that I didn't recognize, leaned across an empty passenger seat to ask if I was okay.

I wasn't sure, but I told him I was anyway.

He raised a hand and slipped down the hill. I trotted across the road and into my car, my hands still trembling.

Why had I called out Andrea's name? Andrea was at the Ritz, probably showering off the day's suntan lotion in a marble shower, her entire being focused on which sundress to wear to dinner that night.

But if I truly believed that, why hadn't I gone right up to the Ritz tonight? And why was I reluctant to make a promise to Ben about it?

I wasn't sober enough to answer these questions. It was time to get home.

I took a cautious U-turn. All the wheels seemed to be working, so I headed for my little cottage.

Time to figure out whether that bottle of whiskey at home still had a shot left in it.

3

I live down a road that looks like a driveway. By some twist of Virgin Islands logic, it's only paved for about twenty feet off the main road, then it turns to deeply rutted dirt with the occasional tire-eating volcanic rock strewn about. The brush along both sides constantly threatens to take the road back. Every now and then I get so tired of the branches whacking my car that I get out my own machete and beat back the long spindly fingers of the native greenery.

You might think I'm kidding about the machete, but no household in St. Thomas is complete without one, which people charmingly pronounce "ma-SHET." You know, no big deal. Just your garden variety, razor-sharp blade that's the size of your right arm. They've got a stack of them at Home Depot. Might as well hand them out at the airport along with your shot of rum, as far as I'm concerned.

Bushwhacking my own driveway is the price I pay for seclusion. It's worth it. This crazy road leads me right up to the guest cottage I occupy. No one sees me come and go. I can barely see the main house from mine because my landlord is letting the bush take over his back yard.

I found this place on the bulletin board at the mail service. After getting directions over the phone, I found the main house easily.

But that was only where the journey began. He was "out back" he'd told me, so I had started by weaving through an obstacle course of construction tools and detritus in the driveway—a table saw, a circular saw, a haphazard stack of 2x4s, a pile of warped tar paper roof shingles, a rusty axe head.

Next, I traversed a rickety wooden walkway—the boards rotting in places and the handrail unreliable—while dodging palm fronds and bougainvillea offshoots. I nearly turned back. There was no way I was going to live in Grey Gardens with this weirdo.

However, when I saw the orange sherbet cottage peek out from behind the bush, I felt my resolve soften. Orange wasn't a color I would have chosen, but it had a plucky charm.

I entered the cottage to find an almost completely open floor plan with a nook for my bed, a full kitchen with no roommates to fill the sink with dirty dishes, a vaulted ceiling, a wall of windows that overlooked the marina and my own personal bathroom with a huge shower. It also came with a few cobwebs, some resident flying cockroaches and a rat-sized hole behind the stove, but every rose has its thorn, right?

When I discovered that the cottage had a back entrance via the half-paved road, I gave my new landlord, Bernard, a deposit on the spot.

Once I moved in, I discovered a delicious seclusion I hadn't known in a while. I can barely hear Bernard, and Bernard can barely hear me. If I want to play that sad, depressing Sheryl Crow album, *The Globe Sessions*, and howl along with her at 2:00 am, it's my prerogative.

However, on a night like tonight, I wished for a little less seclusion and a little more company.

I pulled to the side of the road into the dirt patch that served as my parking spot. It was pitch black. I must have forgotten to leave the outside light on.

I did have a tiny little penlight attached to my keychain. Although it kept me from tripping on the uneven path that led up to the cottage, it didn't really illuminate my surroundings.

But, truly, I would have needed a set of floodlights to dispel the feeling that had descended upon me, one that was making my skin crawl.

My best friend in this situation would be speed. I grabbed my backpack and arranged my keys so that my penlight was shining forward, with my door key tucked in between my index and middle finger, a trick I'd learned in a women's self-defense class in high school.

Then I ran. I pushed my car door open, slammed it behind me and bolted up the rough-hewn path. I heard a rustling in the bush as I sprinted, but I rounded the corner without slowing down to investigate.

Mercifully, I didn't fumble the keys, and I got my door open quickly. When I slammed it shut behind me and threw the deadbolt, I exhaled. With bars on every window, I felt safe. Any stray deer with murder in its heart would have to look elsewhere to get its thrills tonight.

I flipped the main light on, illuminating the entire place. Nothing looked amiss. I checked behind the shower curtain and the couch—a Martha Stewart futon I bought from Kmart. Only then did I feel safe enough to search for that whiskey.

The aforementioned bottle turned out to be Dewar's, which is technically scotch and which is apparently different for reasons that make sense every time I Google it but slip right out of my mind as soon as I take my first sip.

I had two sad-looking ice cubes in my freezer, mere slivers of their former selves. I put them in a coffee mug, then poured myself about half a mug of scotch. This left a whisper in the bottle, which I dispatched by slugging it.

I glanced at the television, which wasn't anything more than a box connected to my DVD player. I half-heartedly flipped through the discs I'd collected, many from friends who were leaving island and shedding possessions. Nothing caught my eye.

I wandered over to my desk. I turned on my laptop, which was the nicest thing I owned. I'd bought it after a great season the year before and treated myself to my very own Internet connection. Getting the Internet installed took almost as long as getting the laptop shipped down from the States—and the Internet was only as reliable as the power, which wasn't saying much. But at least I could use Facebook to stalk my stateside exes and the girls I went to high school with at my leisure.

I took a glance at my "coffee," thinking about the vodka in my belly. Mixing alcohols usually got me into trouble. I took a sip anyway, deciding that this would be an experiment for science, for America and for mankind—actually, make that womankind.

Yeah, I was getting a little loopy.

I brought up Google. I wasn't exactly sure what I was after, but I had some time on my hands, as well as a big question mark hanging in the air. Maybe Google had some answers. I typed in "girl missing on island." Natalee Holloway was the first story to come up. I knew that one pretty well, so I only skimmed the first article. She disappeared after a night of bar hopping with three guys. Her body hadn't yet been found.

I took another sip of scotch and contemplated that. What a way to go. You think you're going to a fun island to have a boozy graduation trip with your friends. You not only never come home, you disappear entirely. I started to wonder what my family would do. Would they fly down like the Holloways? Or would they just shrug and go on with their lives? Probably the latter.

This was dangerous territory. I didn't want to think about my family, not in the state I was in. I felt the old feelings mill start to grind, and I tried putting it to a halt with a click on another article on Natalee's unfortunate disappearance.

As I scanned the words, my mind drifted toward places that van der Sloot could have ditched a body on an island. I felt the prickles of gooseflesh on my arms. I grabbed a sweatshirt off a nearby dining room chair, took another sip of scotch.

Back to the search results.

Google had taken the island part of my query literally, so I got a result from Staten Island, where a teenage girl went missing a few blocks from her house. She was apparently headed for a “behavioral health facility”—was that code for rehab?—and didn’t want to go. She came home later that week. Case closed.

Ah, here was one from a tropical island like mine. A sixteen-year-old girl had gone missing in Hawai’i, only to turn up a month and a half later. The article gave no further explanation for either her disappearance or reappearance. I studied her photo. She had memorable features that could easily have made her a model. Her light brown face was framed with sun-streaked brown hair that flowed gracefully over her shoulders. There were a few freckles scattered across her nose and a dimple in her right cheek that showed as she gave the camera a bright smile. There was an ease about her that spoke of beauty without much of a regimen.

I stared at her face. *Where did you go? And why didn't you tell anyone? What made you run away from the people who loved you?*

Sometimes, the people who say they love you aren’t always the best people for you, I guess. I should know. I took another big slug of scotch.

Before I knew it, I was on Facebook, looking at the profile picture of my sister, Julia. We weren’t friends on Facebook, not anymore. Her public profile told the story she wanted people to see. She was one half of the perfect couple, at ease and in love. She and her husband, Jacob, smiled broadly, his arm slung over her shoulder. They stood on a bright green lawn at what looked like someone’s backyard party. It could have been their backyard. I didn’t know. And I could see the way his fingers gripped the cap of her shoulder. There was nothing casual about it.

Sometimes Julia did look like her picture, with pin-straight blonde hair falling perfectly to her jawline, ivory skin, her features delicate, almost pixie-like. I always wanted the big blue eyes she got from our mother’s side, but mine came out brown.

We were only a year apart, but the distance felt much greater. She always seemed more put together than I was—effortlessly. If our lives were a musical theater production, she would have been the beautiful, dainty soprano. I couldn’t compete, so I chose a different role: the brassy, belty alto who delivers the comic relief, sometimes at my own expense.

I was happy when she met Jacob a few years after college. I really was. “Julia and Jacob”

just sounded right, almost perfect.

It wasn't. It became clear very quickly that he dealt drugs. And did drugs sometimes. Soon, Julia was doing them too.

Sure, I was at some of those parties, the ones they threw in the townhouse they bought just a few miles from my parents. I figured it was safe. If I was going to do drugs, why not do them around people I knew and loved?

I experimented. Julia fell down a hole. When I tried to talk to her about it, I was being uptight. I needed to chill out.

She gave me a pill once that she said would help me "chill out," in her words. She was my big sister, so I just swallowed it. I didn't know what it was and I didn't ask, not until my skin began to crawl about a half an hour later. With chills running up and down my body, I grabbed her arm and demanded to know what she'd given me.

"Relax, Lizzie, it's just a little Ecstasy."

I exploded. Why didn't she tell me it was Ecstasy? Did she think this was funny, to drug her sister?

She just laughed, and so did the friends draped on the couches around her like a pride of lions on the savannah.

All my rage over a lifetime of being cast as her funny man poured out.

They only laughed harder.

But that wasn't when I left. I stuck around to watch as she'd go on bender after bender, spending days in her basement, the lights on low, the TV on high, her hair lanky and unwashed. She'd call into work and tell them she was sick. It wasn't a lie, exactly.

"She'll pull out of it," Jacob would say, and he always seemed to have a pharmacological answer. Jacob only smoked pot, for the record. Never touched the hard stuff, but that didn't stop him from feeding it to Julia. I wasn't sure whether it was meth or heroin or what. I was afraid to ask.

He wasn't entirely wrong. She'd perk up suddenly, clean like a maniac and show up on time for work for a few weeks, sometimes even a few months. Then the cycle would begin again.

After a year of watching, I staged an intervention, sister to sister. Jacob was supposed to be out. I sat in the basement with her, trying not to make a face at the stink that wafted from her body. I offered to drive her to rehab. I offered to take her over to Mom and Dad's. They'd help us find a solution. I told her it didn't have to be like this.

Jacob heard the whole thing. He waited in the kitchen and jumped out at me, wrenching an arm behind my back and pulling me close. He growled threats in my ear,

told me to leave his wife alone.

I wasn't in the mood to take anyone's shit, and I told him so. That's when he pulled the knife, putting its point under my jawline, right where the tips of Julia's beautiful hair rested on her. He told me he had people who could make me disappear if I kept bothering Julia.

I was stunned. I didn't fight. I couldn't flee. I froze.

I can't remember much of the rest of what he said to me, but I do remember the way he pushed me away from him. I stumbled and almost fell. A last-minute grab at a kitchen chair kept me from nosediving face-first into their tile floor. But I kept my feet under me, and I made it to my car, my hands too unsteady to turn the key in the ignition, so I just sat there.

I probably should have gone straight to my parents, showed them the tiny cut under my chin. But I went home instead and drank beer until I passed out.

The next day, I convinced myself it didn't matter.

It wasn't until family dinner at my parents' the next week that I discovered how much it did matter. I started shaking as soon as Jacob walked in the door. I couldn't look Julia in the eye. I kept getting up and leaving the room.

My father finally confronted me and asked what was going on. I broke down. I started crying so hard that I was incoherent.

He sat me down on the couch and took my hand. He knew all about it, he said. Jacob had called him after it happened.

Imagine my shock—and my relief. It kicked off a fresh round of tears, but these were different. I could feel the burden I'd been carrying start to lift.

But then, my world did a 180.

My father told me that it was time to recognize that I had a problem. Jacob and Julia were having a baby and I needed to sober up so I could be a good aunt.

The tears slowed, and I felt my face wrinkle in confusion. I didn't understand. Julia was the one on drugs, I said. I was just trying to help her, and Jacob held a knife to me.

That wasn't how it happened, Jacob said, with calm authority, striding into the room. He'd found me with a stash of drugs and asked me to leave. That's when things got nasty.

It was all I could do to stare at them in turn as my mother and sister filed into the room. My dad looked disappointed. My mother, pinched and nervous. Julia wouldn't make eye contact. Jacob, however, locked eyes with me, sending me a message. *This was what would happen if I persisted.*

I left my parents' house right there and then.

A few weeks later, a bartender at a place I frequented told me she was moving to St.

Thomas in a month. I packed a suitcase and cashed out my bank account. She didn't question why I wanted to go with her. We found an apartment together, shared a car for the first month until she found her own island cruiser. She introduced me to the man who gave me my first boat job. I brought friends to her bar. She taught me about the whole silver lining thing. I taught her how to make my famous key lime pie. We watched each other's backs. If one of us was short for the month, the other covered.

She left after a year for ski season in Colorado. There was big money to be had, she said. She invited me to come, but I didn't want to leave the Caribbean waters that had captivated me.

That was four years ago. I haven't been back home since I left. This place feels like home now. My dad calls every now and then. I used to answer sometimes. But I never felt better after talking to him, so I started dodging his calls. They're more intermittent now, but they still come every now and then. I haven't spoken to Julia or my mom since that day. Jacob, I don't even want to think about.

I closed the browser window displaying Julia's photo.

I took another long slug of scotch.

Only one person on this island knew my story: Ben.

The ache in my chest threatened to explode into tears, screaming—or worse.

I needed to do something. I turned back to my computer and typed in “missing person statistics.” The words swam in front of me briefly as my eyes began to fill with water. I blinked a few times to clear them. I read that one-sixth of missing adults have psychiatric problems. I wondered if that was the case with Andrea.

Snap.

I twitched violently at a noise from outside. Apparently, that scotch was doing nothing to dull my senses. I sat still and listened for the tell-tale clucking that indicated a wild chicken at work. I heard nothing. I waited like a gazelle at the edge of a forest pond, and after a moment of silence so loud my ears started to ring, I turned back to my computer.

We have all kinds of animals running around here at night. You already know about the deer. Stray cats, pigs, goats, mongooses and iguanas also run freely. St. John has wild donkeys. That noise could have come from any one of these night stalkers.

But even as I skimmed a story about how parents often find it necessary to advocate passionately for their missing children, I felt the back of my neck crawl. I was being watched.

Slowly, I swiveled my knees around.

The beauty of my apartment is that the top half of the eastern wall is all screens. In the

morning, I can see all the way to St. John. At night, though, the whole neighborhood can see me. This island is full of trade-offs.

In the state I was in tonight, I felt vulnerable and exposed.

The light from my humble apartment didn't penetrate beyond the screens, so all I saw was a deep indigo-tinted blackness with pinpoint lights from the harbor. Any kind of creepy person could stare back from inches away without being seen. There's even a half-finished porch on the back that provides them a perfect platform for viewing. Not my landlord's smartest creation.

I tried to dismiss my fears, and I turned back to my computer. Every one of my windows—even the wall of screens—had bars, so unless the creepers brought a welding torch, they weren't getting in.

I clicked in to the story of a Vermont girl who went missing. Years later, her parents were still fighting for help to find her.

"If you don't do all this yourself, it doesn't get done," was what her father said to the reporter. I clicked the link to the website they'd set up, but the domain had been forfeited. Nothing there. I wondered if that meant that Brianna had come home. Or had her parents just given up?

I heard another branch snap, and my patience snapped with it. Now I was pissed.

I shoved my chair back with a loud scrape, took four strides toward my front door and grabbed my heavy-duty flashlight. It was a big, black Maglite—half flashlight, half weapon.

I stalked back over to the corner of my cottage and shone the flashlight out the screen, toward the source of the noise. The porch was clear of humans and wild chickens, although it could use a good sweeping. I turned the beam around toward the path between my car and the cottage.

The light swept over a hunched body.

I couldn't help it. I screamed.