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17K words

Reverie Isle: EPISODE 102: “House Rules”

On the seventh day, Brianna shook me awake. The sun wasn't up. The only light came from an oil lamp Brianna raised.

"Fred's gone," B. said. "I think that asshole Peter must have taken him to that goddamn grove. Get up, Kevin! We need to get after them!" Her hair was wild, and the shadows under her eyes looked like bruises. She looked crazy. My whole world was crazy.

But on the first day? Eating sticky chunks of melon with my fingers, sun bright outside and birds of paradise riffing together, everything almost felt normal. Sure, we nearly died the night before, when the yacht sank, and I already wished I could call my folks. But the situation felt temporary. A blip. An anomaly.

"We should be thanking you," Cyndia said, to the old man who rescued us. The rest of us chimed in. Mr. Oliveros acknowledged the chorus with a courtly hand wave.

"You are more than welcome," he said. "You are the first company I have had in many, many years."

The five of us not named Oliveros exchanged looks. Surprise, sympathy, and a little suspicion, too. The old man was awfully composed and well groomed for a hermit castaway.

"Here all by yourself?" Cyndia asked.

"You've been here for years?" Mike asked, a split second later.

"Alone, for the past seven years," Oliveros said.

Seven years all alone? I couldn't get my head around the idea. I fought for space through the day, from the morning struggle for the bathroom with my roommate Bob, through a mobbed commute, into the open office floor plan my company used, where everybody heard and saw everybody else, and the only privacy you got was when you held the door to the bathroom stall.

I gawked at the old man as he sipped his tea; Sofia was pragmatic.

"Do you have a satellite phone?" she asked Oliveros. "Or a radio? Anything we could use to call for help?"

The old man shook his head.

"The question was raised last night," Oliveros, "And I am afraid the answer remains the same. There is no communications equipment here. No way to call for help."

"Ships never visit?" Ming asked. "I don't get it, you must need supplies." Oliveros raised his eyebrows.

"On the island, we make it ourselves or we must do without." Oliveros said. "I collected the melons we have for breakfast. From the well, I drew the jug of water I used to rinse the fruit off, and after breakfast we will use to clean dishes and cutlery. The fish we eat tonight I took this morning from a pair of nets whose location I will show you. Even the salt used to flavor the fish, we must reclaim from the sea."

"I'm really surprised that you don't get ships stopping by here," Mike said.

"I uttered some version of that sentiment, perhaps less politely, when I first found myself here," Oliveros said. "I have been on this island more than three decades. I have never seen a ship come close that did not founder, never heard an airplane overhead that did not crash." He sounded apologetic. We traded more covert looks. Did we think the old man was crazy? Did anyone want to challenge him?

"No one ever tried building a boat?" Cyndia asked.

"Yes, of course they have," Oliveros said. "I have watched twelve men and women, on three different ships built with great effort, set sail. I watched all three ships run aground on the shoals that circle the island. Only one of the twelve would-be sailors made it back to shore. There are sharks in the water out there, you see."

The stairs creaked. Peter, in pajamas, picked that moment to make his entrance. He held up a hand to ward off the sunlight.

"I need coffee," Peter announced. "Or a pistol and a bullet so I can end my own misery."

"There is an herbal tea I enjoy," Oliveros said, "But no coffee, I am afraid. The plant is not native to the island."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Peter said. Cyndia shook her head with disapproval at the casual blasphemy, but Peter either didn't see or saw and didn't care. He collapsed into a chair next to Ming. "What are we talking about?"

"Our host," Ming said, "Our very kind and generous host was telling us about the island."

"Looks very tropical out there," Peter said. "I'm ready to be rescued. I have this thing for civilization. By which I mean air conditioning. And, oh my God, indoor plumbing. Anybody else visit the outhouses yet?"

"Mr. Oliveros doesn't seem to think we're going to be rescued anytime soon," Cyndia said. Peter laughed, winced, rubbed his temples.

"Our friend in there is rich," Peter said, to Oliveros. "Like have hospital wings named after your grandad rich. His family is probably freaking out right this second. They'll send planes, helicopters, ships, whatever. We didn't go very far last night. Even with the storm." Oliveros nodded, gravely.

"I look forward to seeing them," he said. He walked over to the cutting board, located a piece of fruit and a chef's knife. Steel flashed; Oliveros deposited chunks of melon onto a porcelain plate. He wiped down the cutting board, retrieved his plate. "I have made this place my home," he said, "But I would cherish a return to civilization. Before my flight crashed, I worked for a global construction firm. I flew all over the world, doing whatever my employer requested. I was a company man! I did what was required, even when others shirked the task." He smiled. "Of course, none of that mattered after I washed up on the beach here. A handful of people, other castaways, greeted me. The house was here. The plumbing was already broken, but the herb and vegetable gardens flourished. In my former life, in the construction firm, I was in upper management. I knew nothing about raising chickens, cleaning fish or making yeast, but this and a hundred more things I have learned." He speared a chunk of melon with his fork, took a bite.

"You will not know what to do with yourself when we are returned to civilization," Sofia said. Oliveros ducked his head in her direction, smiled. He continued to eat as he spoke, stabbing and downing one perfect cube of fruit after another. He did everything with grace. Every moment was controlled, measured. Like a dancer.

"I have no map of the island," Oliveros said. "But I can tell you there is a volcano to the northwest. Dormant, praise be to God. Sugar cane fields in the south. Poppy fields north. A dirt path connects the house with both. A freshwater stream in the middle of the island. The further from the house you go, the more dangerous the island becomes. Poisonous snakes, swarms of mosquitos and stinging bugs... Most dangerous of all, and to avoided at all costs, is a grove at the center of the island."

"What's in the grove?" Peter asked, immediately. Oliveros inclined an eyebrow.

"As I say, the further inland, the more dangerous the island becomes," he said.

"Like how?" Peter asked.

"The vegetation becomes increasingly dense, the ground unstable. The wild creatures of the island become bold." Oliveros said, "There are predators of all varieties, snakes and spiders, but of particular concern... along the shores of the island and on the banks of the stream, crocodiles."

“Crocodiles?” Mike asked. “Little island like this, they can’t be too big, can they?” Oliveros shrugged.

“I have seen the specimens as large as five meters,” he said. “That is large enough for me. If you choose to go exploring, which I do not recommend, please, be alert, okay?”

"I don't think any of us are going to feel like hijinks with Fred in the shape he's in," Peter said.

“Wise,” the old man said, head bobbing amiably.

"I've been trying to think up ways we can help the rescue people find us," Mike said. "There's not even a busted radio I could look at and try to fix?" The old man shook his head.

"The stove is the most advanced item in this house," he said, "And it dates to the nineteenth century. Behind the counter, if you wish to look in the drawers you will find small things, watches, pictures, a cassette tape, even. Mostly junk, but for sure no phone that will talk to satellites. Oh! Before I forget. In the coat closet, here on the first floor, there are spare clothes, left over from previous guests. I encourage you all to look and see if there is anything which suits you."

Next to me, Ming straightened up in her seat when the old man mentioned spare clothes. Sofia wasn't distracted.

“If we cannot get access to radios or a satellite phone, maybe we go lower tech?” Sofia said. “Like a signal fire?”

“That’s a good idea,” Peter said. Sofia blinked at him. She seemed startled, but then she’d been working for a while for Fred. Positive feedback wasn’t one of his strengths. Oliveros nodded with the rest of us. “We get a signal fire set up and the second we see a ship or a plane, we set it off.”

"There is a stone-lined fire pit, five or ten minutes down the path leading north of the hotel," Oliveros said. "Alas, my wood and kindling supplies are quite depleted! Speaking frankly, I am unprepared to care for so many people. The needs of one man and nine are quite different."

"I get that," Peter said. "We can help with firewood while we're working on the signal fire. Can you lend us an ax? More than one, preferably." Oliveros nodded as Peter spoke.

"There is a workshop, halfway to the fire pit, due north. There should be two or three axes in the shed. Also, machetes and knives. Take what you need."

"Cool," Peter said. "Ming? Kevin? You want to help?"

“What happened to the other castaways?” Cyndia asked Oliveros. “The ones who didn’t die on the rocks?”

“Kind of a morbid question, isn’t that?” Peter asked.

“No,” Oliveros said, to Peter. “She is right to ask. How we care for our dead says much about how civilized we are. There is a small graveyard to the south. I have buried all those who did not perish at sea, but of course that does not include any of those who have gone inside the grove.”

“The grove again,” Peter said. Oliveros might have winced, for a moment, but the old man’s expression smoothed out fast. He ignored Peter.

"I wonder if - before you go - I could impose on some of you," Oliveros said, "To help me with the chores. The morning's work is done, but the afternoon promises to be quite busy."

"And if rescue arrives in a few hours?" Sofia asked. Oliveros smiled. He opened his arms, bowed his head. He was good at smiling; he always made me feel like I was in on the joke.

"The very instant we see a boat, a plane, or a helicopter, I will of course join you in trying to attract attention." Sofia nodded.

"Brianna asked for help with Fred," Cyndia said. "Cleaning up after him, watching him while she tries to get some sleep... I told her I'd be there after breakfast. Otherwise, I'd volunteer."

"You help Brianna and Fred," Sofia said. "I will do the chores with Mr. Oliveros."

"I'll help with the chores, too," Mike said.

"Thank you," Oliveros said, nodding to Mike and Sofia.

"Such good people," Peter said.

"Work makes the time go faster, that's all," Mike said. He looked faintly embarrassed.

"Rum does the trick, too," Peter said.

"You may wish to pace yourself on the liquor, young man," Oliveros said, still smiling. "Supplies are quite limited. Before more can be made, certain resources must be harvested, and then the distillation process itself requires some time and expertise." Peter nodded.

"Pace myself. Roger that," Peter said, cheerfully.

"Question," Cyndia said. "Mr. Oliveros, could you show me where you keep the rest of the medical supplies?" Oliveros shook his head.

"Everything we have is in the black bag I left in the room with your friends Francis and Brianna." Cyndia didn't look happy. I wasn't clear why she cared about the quality of medical care on the island, but whatever.

"Thanks anyway," Cyndia said. The old man bowed back.

"The day is getting away from us, What else? Oh!" Oliveros said. "Michael, Sofia... We will be wading out quite deep in the water, so prepare yourself accordingly. Everyone else should free to browse the coat check for clothes more suited to work than pajamas. Come, now!"

We must be quick about it! The tides do not wait, and our nets cannot be reached when the tide is in! Peter, come with me, I will point you in the direction of the firepit, and the stand of trees I would suggest harvesting for lumber.”

"Should we be following and listening?" I asked Ming. She squinted at Peter.

"Yes," Ming said. "No. Shit. Not until I've had a chance to check out what kind of clothes we've got in that cloak room. I'm sick of these pajamas and my bathing suit still isn't completely dry."

Sofia must have heard her.

"Not a lot of good options in here," she called out, voice muffled. "Unless you have a yellow slicker fetish." She came back into view wearing a pair of waders held up with suspenders and a t-shirt stenciled with a cartoon mouse. Mike followed in white t-shirt and gray sweat pants tucked into black rubber boots that looked a size too big.

Ming disappeared into the cloak room.

"Sofia! Michael!" Oliveros called. "The tide waits for no one!"

"Our cue," Mike said. He and Sofia stepped outside; Peter came back indoors while we called out goodbyes.

"We've got a long hike ahead of us," he said. "Where did Ming go?"

Ming emerged from the coat room in black plastic clogs, yellow sweat pants and a white t-shirt. A lacy white, wide-brimmed hat straight out of the 70s hid her eyes. Ming dropped red bathing trunks and a large green t-shirt on my shoulder and moved on before I could say thanks. She handed Peter cargo shorts and a baby blue polo shirt.

"I think Cyndia outsmarted all of us," Peter said, "Volunteering to stay here in the shade."

"You want to swap jobs?" Cyndia said. "B and I do get to stay inside the house, but we also have to clean up after your friend Fred. If you think wiping his butt sounds like fun..." Peter laughed, held up his hands in defeat.

"God, no. You're a better person than I am." He glanced over at Ming. "Thanks for the clothes, baby. I'm more of an autumn, but what are you going to do? Let's change and meet back here in ten minutes."

The weight of the axe felt reassuring on my shoulder. I kept flicking my eyes from point to point, alert for movement, split branches or piles of scat. Birds wheeled in the sky. I swatted at mosquitos uselessly. I wasn't big on bugs or shiny segmented bodies and wings that whined in my ears. I didn't like the tiny suckers topping off on my blood. I slapped and scratched and usually came up empty. I hated the dot-sized bastards. I didn't need any more reasons to sweat.

"We're going to start by harvesting a tree where the old man told us," Peter said. "Actually, the first thing I want to do is make a sled, so dragging wood around isn't such a pain."

Too bad the Land Rover under the tarp isn't working. That'd make this so much easier. Oh, well." Peter smiled. "That's why I have assistants."

"Peter," Ming said, "Do you know when Sofia started working for Fred?"

"A year ago, I think. Why?"

"Just curious," Ming said. Peter raised his eyebrows. He lowered his voice to a murmur.

"You think she had something to do with the crash?"

"What? God, no! I was just curious," Ming said. She came across as embarrassed, but I wasn't sure why.

"Tell you what I'm curious about," I said. "You think the old man is crazy?"

"A little," Ming said. "For sure."

"How could you possibly stay sane, living alone on this island, year after year?" Peter said.

"Yeah," Ming said. "I feel for the guy."

"Assuming he's telling the truth about having been here for so long," I said.

"I feel like you're more suspicious than you used to be, Kev," Peter said. "And I like the change, I really do. To be fair to the old man, though?" Peter said. "I keep listening for the sound of planes. I keep looking in the sky, but... nothing. Not a damn thing."

"Rescue efforts take time," I said. "Besides, the same storm that hit us probably got the island where Fred's family is staying. Might have slowed things down."

"Yeah, that's... plausible, I guess," Peter said. "Okay, gang, we need to collect kindling and tinder along with wood. After we take the tree down, we might be better off splitting up. Either of you ever used an axe before? No? Oh, my God. Who hired you for this job?"

"You're in an awfully good mood for someone who was hungover just a couple hours ago," Ming said. She leaned in close, sniffed. She pulled back with a look of righteous fury.

"Jesus, Peter, did you take another bottle of the old man's rum?"

"I did not," Peter said. "The idea is hurtful to me."

"You smell like rum," Ming said.

"Well, I have been drinking," Peter conceded. "But I didn't take the whole bottle. I found a pocket flask in the junk drawer the old man told us about."

"And you filled up the flask with rum," I guessed.

"Which only holds, like, a fifth of a bottle," Peter said. "I'm pacing myself! Oh, don't look at me like that. We're supposed to be on vacation, aren't we?"

Even tipsy, Peter turned out to be a surprisingly patient teacher. He showed us how to cut notches in tree trunks so they fell predictably. Ming and I took turns reducing a dead gray tree to lumber while Peter critiqued our form and assembled his sled.

In the back of my mind, I kept expecting to hear the buzz of a helicopter, intensifying in volume as it drifted overhead. I glanced at the horizon, always waiting to be surprised by the sight of a ship. Disappointed, every time.

"I've got blisters," Ming said, eyeing her hands. She mopped at her forehead with the back of a fist. All three of us dripped with sweat; the sled was loaded up with chunks of lumber, thin branches, and a bunch of moss Peter swore would make good kindling when it dried out. "But I feel less stressed out."

"I'm starting to get hungry," Peter said.

"Let's get the signal fire set up first," Ming said. "Then look for food."

"The old man's pantry is packed with good stuff," Peter said. "Cured meat, pickled veggies, biscuits, jellies..."

"I think the old man might not be happy if we take his food without asking," I said.

"And we might die if we eat some berry that turns out to be poisonous. Didn't the old man say something about poisonous plants?" Ming shook her head, grabbed one of the ropes attached to the sled. Peter and I added our axes to the heap, then followed her example.

"We don't want to piss the guy off," I said, flexing my fingers. I got a good grip on the rope. "We don't know how long we'll be stuck here. Just makes sense to be polite."

"On three," Ming said. "Walk!"

Humidity plus blood-sucking bugs plus a homemade sled over a game path equals misery. Peter surprised me; he kept up. My triceps and biceps in both arms burned, and my back ached. When we made it to the firepit, my shoulder was raw where the rope dug into my skin. The sun was high in the sky. Peter's skin looked more pink than usual, and he dripped sweat, but he kept moving.

"Wow," Peter said, crouching by the stone-lined pit. "Look at all that ash. Lots of fires burned here. People have been here a long time. The old man wasn't lying about that."

"Would the seaweed on the beach make good kindling, or tinder, whatever?" Ming asked. Peter looked around.

"Yeah, if it's dried out," he said. He scratched his head. "Might be edible, too. But maybe collect it later?"

"Why?" I asked. As good a teacher as Peter was, I was tired of taking his direction all the time. I was ready to reassert myself. (Also, I get irritable when I get tired.)

"Well," Peter said. "Maybe because there's a big old crocodile a hundred, hundred fifty yards down the beach."

"Jesus," I said. I looked down the beach. I saw the bastard. Bumpy, armored, toothy. I bit my tongue. I wanted to run, fast, in another direction, before the killing machine noticed us. The feel of the weapon in my hand was a comfort, but not much.

"Kevin, put down the ax and help Ming finish unloading the sled," Peter said. "I'll keep an eye on the croc. Let's leave half of the load, take the rest back to the house. The old man wasn't kidding about being low on wood."

"The goddamn crocodile is freaking me out," Ming confessed, but even as her voice shook, she kept moving.

"He isn't even looking at us. God damn it!" Peter whispered. "As soon as I said that, he looked over here."

I grabbed an armful of branches, tried to put them on top of an existing stack. The stack fell, and I was left trying to pile them back up while Ming stacked logs. I hustled back to load up again, but Peter held up a hand, shaking his head with vigor, but in silence.

It's hard to appreciate the triumph of man over nature until you find yourself in a wild place, where humanity's position at the top of the food chain is still under debate. Flowers are pretty, and green is good, but you can't forget that part of nature is getting eaten and shit out by crocodiles.

I felt like my heartbeat was loud enough for the croc to hear.

When Peter dropped his hand, Ming and I both drooped. Peter kept a finger to his lips but grabbed one of the sled's ropes. Ming and I picked up the other two.

We pulled on a silent three count. Every step we took in a direction away from the crocodile was a step towards safety, normality and calm.

We made damn good time.

"The birds are really beautiful," Ming said, during one of our rare, momentary breaks from hauling. "I mean, I've never been a big bird person?"

"I was a cookie monster guy," Peter said. Which struck me as a really stupid bit of word play but also made me laugh, a little, and hope, a little, that someday this was all going to be the source of great dinner party stories. Maybe it was the adrenaline?

"Check out the guy with the floppy white crest," Ming said, ignoring Peter. "He looks like he's trying to pay homage to Anne Burrell."

"Who?" I said.

"Kevin apparently doesn't watch the Food Channel," Peter said.

"I don't have cable," I said.

"You don't have a secret girlfriend or something?" Peter asked me. I felt my mood drop. Yeah, as if. I faked a laugh.

"Nah, man," I said. "No girlfriend."

"Doesn't watch TV," Ming said, "Isn't in a relationship, never posts anything on social media... Kevin, sweetie, you know you're allowed to enjoy life, right? That it's okay to have a little fun with your friends?"

My mood sank down even further. I heard what Ming said and I felt tremendously, miserably guilty. I didn't want to put distance between myself and other people. I just wasn't any good at being close. I didn't know how to talk to people. I didn't know what they wanted to hear, or what I was supposed to say. And I wasn't a fun person.

"I'm sorry I fell out of touch," I said. "I didn't mean to shut you guys out. The doctors... I guess I'm clinically depressed?"

"Dude, where did this come from?" Peter said. "We're on vacation, we're not supposed to be introspective." He pronounced the last word with horror.

"I feel bad," I said. "Like I owe people an apology." Peter rolled his eyes at me.

"I don't think you owe anyone an apology," Ming said. She punched me in the shoulder. "I'm sorry I teased you," she said. "I just missed hearing from you."

"Yeah," I said, awkwardly.

"Are you two going to hug?" Peter asked. "Because if you are, go ahead, and then let's get back to dragging the wood home. I don't think we're too far. We just need one more big push."

Peter didn't ask me any questions as we hauled the wood back to the house and or say anything as we stacked firewood with the (meager) existing supply, but I felt his eyes on me.

I didn't like the feeling. I felt judged. I remembered Peter talking about his family being crazy, and the way he laughed at them. I wished if Peter had questions about depression he would go ahead and just ask!

A few moments after we threw the last chunk of wood on the pile, and Ming disappeared into the house, Peter grabbed my arm.

"I'm on lithium," he told me, in a quiet voice. He smiled, but in his eyes I saw something shadowy and troubled "Or I was," Peter corrected himself. "A couple more days, and I'm going to start to feel more like myself. God help you poor bastards."

"We'll be rescued long before then," I told Peter. He patted me on the shoulder, on one of the isolated patches of my large green shirt that wasn't soaked with sweat.

"Dude," he said. "Of course, we will!"

Making sugar syrup from raw sugar cane

- 1) *Strip bark from cane*
- 2) *Press, smash, squeeze pulp chunks over fireproof container*
- 3) *Reduce liquid residue over open flame*
- 4) *Stir frequently*
- 5) *Bring to slow boil*
- 6) *Pour onto center of large pan (or leaf)*
- 7) *As syrup cools, brush out into thin layers*

Yellow boots and a collapsed pair of waders like a beached squid sat outside the hotel's front doors. I heard voices inside. Mike sat in a chair near the door, rubbing his bare right foot.

"I'm tired," Mike said, "And I'm missing my family."

"Of course. I am too," Sofia said, with heat in her voice. "I just ask that you do not take your frustrations out on me."

"Yeah," Mike said. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"What did we miss?" Peter asked. Ming pushed past him and flopped down on the sofa, leaving a space between herself and Sofia.

"Anybody else hungry?" I said, with a smile. I wasn't like Peter. I couldn't laugh at other's people discomfort. Whatever happened between Sofia and Mike wasn't any of my business. And I really was hungry. Peter took a chair. I stretched out on the floor, on my back, my head cradled in my hands.

"The old man had us running after him all day," Mike said. "There's a vegetable garden, an herb garden and a big stand of corn. We foraged for coconuts. We drew water from the well."

"We checked fishing lines," Sofia said. "We grabbed grasshoppers to bait hooks. We checked three different nets, and we carried home the fish we will eat for dinner. We checked on the goats he keeps penned up, and he showed us how to feed the chickens."

"He's got so much energy," Mike said. He sighed. "He's in the kitchen right now. He wanted us to help him clean and butcher the fish. Like I know how to do any of that."

"I can butcher a chicken," Peter volunteered. Sofia winced.

"Yeah. So can Sofia," Mike said. He rubbed at his eyes. I heard floorboards creak, and I lifted my head up high enough to check who was coming. Cyndia, I saw. I relaxed.

"Hey, guys," she called out. "You look... tired."

"No, you look tired," Peter said. He held up his hand. "I'm kidding," he said. "I'm worn out. Too much sun. Too much exercise. Too much crocodile."

"Oliveros needs help in the kitchen," Mike said. "And I'm trying to psych myself up. I'll get up in a second here."

"You guys relax. I'll help the old man in the kitchen," Cyndia said.

"You're an angel," Peter said. "So beautiful. With such a giving heart."

"I recognize flattery when I hear it, Peter," Cyndia said, the volume of her voice diminishing as she walked away. She laughed. "Keep it coming!"

Oliveros had us take out sections of the dining room table, to make it cozy for our party of eight. The silver wall paper with embossed fleur-de-lys looked like something Josephine Bonaparte might have chosen. The bare white plates and yellow silver flatware all matched. I didn't recognize the seared white fish Oliveros served us, but seasoned with salt, onions and dried peppers the filets looked better than the most expensive entree Fred ever bought me.

Oliveros held up a hand; I froze, my fork in mid-flight, then put my silverware down. Cyndia's head was bowed, her hands folded before her. Even Peter bowed his head.

"Might I ask the indulgence of everyone at the table?" Oliveros said. "I would like to say a blessing for our meal. Let us give thanks to the Lord for the lives of the beasts sacrificed to feed our hunger. For the walls and doors which keep us safe, even as peril stalks outside. For this unexpected bounty of fellowship you have chosen to confer upon us, for all these things, we thank you, Lord. Amen."

Cyndia, Mike, Peter and I all echoed the amen. The others waited respectfully for Oliveros to pick up his silverware before attacking their food.

"We need more help out there tomorrow," Mike said. He was composed. Cleaner, too. Before dinner, Ming, Peter, Mike and I talked about running down to the beach and rinsing off in the ocean. Mike was the only one who did more than talk. He looked refreshed. I didn't regret my nap, and I doubted Peter did, either. When I stretched out in the couch, the last thing I remember was Ming looking through the books on the shelves for volumes that weren't too water-damaged to read.

"We should all be taking turns," Sofia said. "Mike and I can share what we know."

"Any help would be most appreciated," Oliveros said. "With more time, I could begin distilling the rum you, Peter, drink at such a remarkable rate. I could make cheese, jams. Bake bread."

"Hey," Brianna said, from behind Oliveros. Everybody looked up. My chair scraped the floor as I got up. I hugged B., hard, while behind me everyone else called out their hellos.

"No change with Fred," Brianna said, to the dining room.

"Take a seat," Oliveros said, to Brianna. "I have a plate prepared for you, but I thought you would be taking it in the bedroom."

"I'm sorry," Cyndia said, to Brianna. "I should have come and got you sooner."

"Come on, Cyndia," Sofia said. "You barely touched your food. Both of you, sit and eat. I will keep an eye on Fred."

Brianna and Cyndia both started to argue.

"Hush, you two," Peter said. "Say thank you to Sofia, then hush up and eat. The food is pretty much the only unequivocal good thing about the island."

"Cyndia said you guys built a signal fire?" Brianna asked, eyes flipping from Peter to me and Ming.

"We've got the wood and kindling we need," Peter said. "We didn't get one built, partly because we didn't hear a plane, but also... a crocodile took an interest in us."

"A crocodile?" Brianna asked.

"No kidding. Huge," Ming said. "Maybe a hundred feet from us."

"How have you survived here for so long?" Brianna asked Oliveros. The old man shrugged.

"I have always stayed close to the house," Oliveros said. "And I have never allowed myself to succumb to temptation."

"What kind of temptation?" Peter said, with interest.

"There have been many," Oliveros said. "Brianna, tell me about Fred. How was his day?"

"I think he's less feverish," Brianna said. "He talked a lot last night and this morning. Nothing I understood. Everything he said was garbled. But around noon, he stopped talking. And his sleep seemed... better? Deeper."

"Ah," Oliveros said. "I think this is encouraging news."

"I'm going to need some sheets washed soon," Brianna said.

"You can rinse them out in the ocean tomorrow," Oliveros said. "Clothes and nicer sets of sheets I generally prefer to scrub and soak in well or river water. The salt, you know. But for those, it is fine."

"I can help with the washing," Cyndia told Brianna, who bobbed her head in thanks.

"Do you have soap?" Brianna asked Oliveros.

"I do," Oliveros said. "Though softer and perhaps less fragrant than the soaps to which you are accustomed. But it cleans. Making nicer-smelling soap is another skill I am happy to teach you, if we can find time."

"We'll be rescued long before that should be necessary," Brianna said. She winced, reached out a hand to the old man. "I mean, thank you, I appreciate the offer."

"Realistically, though," Mike jumped in. "Brianna is right. I bet first light tomorrow morning we get buzzed by a plane or a helicopter, and we're out of here by noon."

"I hope you are correct," Oliveros said. "With all my heart. But I can rely upon you to review the nets tomorrow before breakfast?"

"Yeah," Mike said. He did not sound excited.

"Kevin's going with Mike," Ming announced.

"I am?" I said. "Where are you going to be?"

"I'm going to team up with Sofia out in the gardens," Ming said.

"Hey," Peter said. "You can't both desert me."

"Sure, we can," Ming said. "Until we need another sled full of wood, anyway."

"Mr. Oliveros," Peter said, "Do you know if the Land Rover under the tarp starts?"

"Something is wrong with the engine," Oliveros said. "And I am no engineer. The car has not run in two decades. There are some tools, wrenches and such, some spare parts and a large can of petrol in the tool shed, but nothing else."

"You mind if I take a look under the tarp tomorrow?" Peter said. Oliveros shrugged. Peter nodded. "Cool."

"I know a thing or two about cars," Mike said.

Oil lamps lit the house after dark, supplemented by candles that I felt pretty sure Oliveros made himself. Theoretically, we could stay awake as late as we wanted. As I watched the sun sink on the horizon, though, my eyelids already felt heavy. Our first day on the island was exhausting. I wasn't used to walking, or swinging an axe, or being trapped behind enemy lines in goddamn crocodile country.

On day two, I was up before dawn. I struggled getting out of bed. I shut my eyes and imagined decanting a freshly ground batch of darkly roasted beans into the filter for my coffee maker. When I inhaled, I could almost smell the rich, earthy flavor. My door creaked open.

"Kevin," Mike said, poking his head in. "You up?"

"Yeah," I said. "Of course." I threw off the bedsheet. I tried to navigate a pitch-black room. I smacked my shins against the bedframe. I knocked my bedside table over. I walked out with my t-shirt on backwards, but I counted that as a win. I met Mike downstairs, where I struggled into a pair of waders and followed him outside. "Oliveros not coming?" Mike shook his head.

"He said to go on ahead," he said. "You ready?"

"Yeah," I said. I wanted a latte, a chocolate croissant and an hour in a tiled bathroom with working plumbing and a fat roll of soft toilet tissue, but I wasn't going to complain. Not out loud, anyway. Mike grunted at me and led the way, swinging a wooden bucket in his left hand.

In the pre-dawn hours, the island had a lush, misty serenity that I genuinely appreciated, despite the circumstances. If I had a phone, the pics I could have taken! I thought a few times about striking up a conversation with Mike. I wanted to know why he thought we hadn't been rescued yet. I worried about my parents. Birds wearing gaudy green and red coats laughed over our heads as we ducked through a stand of trees on our way to the lines. I wound up keeping my mouth shut. I was never close with Mike back home. Besides, I didn't want to disturb the quiet magic of the early morning, punctuated by the creak of the bucket's handle and the sound of our progress.

Four fish waited for us in a gilly net the old man stretched between a pole and a convenient outcropping of rock. The first one I grabbed fought me harder than I expected. The fish got free, briefly, but Mike moved fast. He netted the bastard while the fish flopped in the mud, before it could flip itself back into water.

"Good catch," I said. Mike grunted, pitched the fish into the bucket.

"Slippery critters, right?" Mike said. "I hope we do better with the other net. Before we get out of here, we just need to make sure there aren't any tangles or... I think we're fine. Let me just look to be sure."

One of the reasons why I settled on project management as a career was my frustration working as a grunt and being ordered to do stuff without any context or explanation. As a PM, I made sure my team got all the background information they needed.

I hated standing around like an idiot.

"Mike," I said, after a while.

"We're fine," Mike said, standing. "Come on, let's get to the second net."

"Cool," I said. Mike trudged off in a new direction. He called back to me.

"The old man said to be on the lookout for crocodiles in the area around the second net."

I felt suddenly clear-headed and awake.

"Did he?" I swallowed. "Cool."

"Keep an eye out for grasshoppers, too," Mike said.

"Are you saying the grasshoppers on the island are dangerous?" I asked Mike. He laughed.

"No, dude. If you see one, grab him. They make good bait."

"You don't seriously expect me to catch a grasshopper, do you?" I said.

"You'll see." Mike said. "They're huge and stupid."

"I'll do my best," I said. "But I don't know if I can make any promises."

"Sure," Mike said. We walked together for a couple minutes in silence. "Kevin, dude, I want you to know how sorry I am," he said, in a different, softer voice. "I feel responsible for all of us being stuck here, and I just want you to know I'd do anything to make it up to everyone."

"Hold up," I said, "How are you responsible?"

"I was the ship's pilot. I must have screwed up programming the autopilot to take us back to the resort. Fred didn't take us that far out the commercial shipping lanes! And I thought I tripped the emergency beacon, but now after three days I'm starting to think maybe I screwed that up, too." Mike's face was flushed. I looked away when I saw how close to tears he was. I didn't want to embarrass him. Inside, I was angry. I didn't want to hear Mikey say he screwed up turning on the emergency beacon. I wanted to grab and shake the dude and scream at him, but I also heard a voice in the back of my head (sounding a lot like my mom) telling me that yelling wasn't going to accomplish anything, except maybe making Mikey feel worse and screwing up whatever feeble friendship we shared. I took a breath, made myself say kind things.

"You're putting way too much pressure on yourself," I said. "Everything is going to turn out fine. You'll see."

"Thanks, man," Mike said. He sounded choked up, which I carefully ignored.

"Tell me about these grasshoppers," I said. "What's the trick to catching them?"

After Mike and I checked the second net, he taught me how to impale a grasshopper on a fish hook. We checked all of Oliveros' lines, added three more fish to the bucket, rebaited. I was ready to call it a day. The sun was heading down, and my stomach rumbled with hunger. We still had a line of traps to check and reset. Not a single trap paid off. Poor Mike broiled in the afternoon sun; I watched him go from pink in the morning to angry red. Back at the hotel, Oliveros appeared with a jar full of greasy goop that smelled floral but (Mike reported) dulled the pain of the sunburn better than any commercial product he knew.

On the third day, Fred rose from a dead sleep.

I was outside, in the section of the garden where Oliveros grew tomatoes from vines staked and driven upward through a sturdy trellis.

"Stick your finger in the dirt," Sofia said to me. "To see if it needs water. If you want the most accurate reading, you must not be afraid to get dirt under your fingernails."

"Is this how you imagined this trip would turn out?" I asked Sofia. She shrugged.

"For me, this was always a business trip."

"Strictly business?" I said. She might have smiled, but it vanished so fast I wasn't sure.

"My fiance kept asking me the same question before we left," Sofia said. "Are you sure this trip is strictly business? But it is. Was." I nodded, noting the careful way she'd signaled a lack of interest.

I've got pretty good self-esteem. I go out, I get my share of attention. Some of them, okay, most want me to be somebody I'm not: a raw-dogging gangster, or a pro athlete, or some such. But between Brianna, Ming and Sofia I was a little tired of rejection, polite or not.

"Everything that's happened since I stepped off the plane feels crazy to me," I said, avoiding Sofia's eyes. I stuck my finger in the soil, a couple feet down from where Sofia demonstrated the technique. "A little dry," I said. I looked up to see her nodding in approval.

We both looked up when we heard the scream. Sofia wiped her hand on shorts a size too big, even as we both took off running for the main house.

We found Fred sprawled on a sofa in the lobby. Brianna sat cross-legged on the floor, looking at Fred like he just stepped off a movie screen. His hair poked out of bandages, his left leg was splinted, and the bruises up and down his body a study in yellow, purple and black. His lips looked dry and chapped, but Fred looked cheerful. He waved a long ivory pipe at us. We must have interrupted Oliveros; he looked over his shoulder at us, but as usual the guy's poise was impeccable. He didn't seem annoyed; Oliveros waved us forward.

"Good to see you awake," I told Fred, while we fist bumped per tradition, two quick taps.

"Can't believe I was out so long," Fred said. He licked his lips. "And it's good to see you, Kevin - oh God, you, too, Sofia - but this good man was just about to show me how to smoke the opium he prescribed for pain relief."

"Opium?" I said.

"A previous visitor was quite fond of opium, and left us with a considerable supply," Oliveros said. "And, of course. the poppy grows in fields in the northeastern part of the island. You must take care, of course, to use opiates wisely. Constipation can kill here on the island."

"We're not going to be here long enough for it to become a problem," Fred said. He flicked the Zippo, dragged flame over the bowl and inhaled. Fred exhaled a long plume of white smoke, and we all relaxed.

He was our sun, the point around which everything organized itself. It was the money, but it was Fred himself. He had a gravity, a pull, that held us all in his orbit, no matter how hard we struggled to break free. Fred was our star. Our bright, white star.

"They should be here by now," Fred said, squinting into the bowl of the pipe. He shook his head. He took another pull. "Unless they think we eloped, which I may or may not have threatened to do."

"Multiple times," Brianna confirmed, with a wince. Fred laughed.

“Wouldn’t that be hilarious?” Fred said.

I thought about my parents. I wondered if they called my phone. Even when I couldn’t (or didn’t want to) talk, I always shot back a text message, just to say hey, I’m alive. I’m okay. I wondered how they’d respond when they couldn’t get me. How long until they freaked out?

“Sorry, Fred,” I said. “But that would not be hilarious.”

“They will know something is wrong when they cannot reach you or me,” Sofia said to Brianna. B. nodded, but I wasn’t sure she was convinced.

“Can we get some music in here?” Fred said. “I could really go for some music.” He took a long hit.

“Sorry, darling,” B. said. “We’re living a little rough.”

“Where’s my phone?” Fred asked, frowning.

“Your phone,” Sofia said, “Is on the ocean floor along with the yacht.” Fred blinked.

“Right. Fuck,” he said. “I really am high. I was just thinking this, all of this, is just so fucking bonkers...” He waved his arms, knocking the delicate white pipe flying. Sofia moved past me, made a remarkable catch. “Sweet,” Fred said. His eyelids sagged.

“Do you need to take a nap?” Brianna said. She looked at Oliveros. “Is it okay for him to sleep? It’s okay, right?” Oliveros nodded.

“Just a quick nap,” Fred said. “Be right back.”

Fred dozed for the rest of the afternoon. When Brianna ordered him, he spooned down broth Oliveros made, and he dutifully finished the glasses of water Brianna brought. Fred wasn’t himself, and that was okay. Better than okay.

The rest of us tried to keep ourselves occupied when we weren’t working our asses off.

Ming was always a reader. I read a bunch as a kid, mostly because my phone was always a piece of junk. My parents wouldn’t let me have a PC in my bedroom until I was fifteen, and that’s when my romance with the printed page ended. Not Ming! She worked her way through some of the most random books: philosophy, neuroscience, a history of Istanbul. And all for fun!

Of course, Ming was the one who found the messages hidden in the books. Messages makes them sound coherent. They were just scribbled notes in the margins of the warped and water damaged books Ming took down from the shelves to read. She mentioned the hidden messages to me and Peter after dinner, the day Fred woke up. She brought us upstairs, into her room, which could have been mine except for the location of the mold patches and the books Ming piled up on her bedside table.

There was a list of names on the inside of a hardcover copy of Peter Benchley’s novel *The Island: Jose Martinez. Jose Fernandez. Felipe Lopez. Martigne Alou. Juan Carlos. Alberto Cardenas. SS Blue Draeger 1984*

In the white space of the front page of the same book, a line in blotchy blue ink remained visible: *Su fantasía es nuestra pesadilla*.

“Here’s where I wish I took Spanish instead of French in college,” Peter said.

“Right?” Ming said. “I think it’s something like... your story is my... I don’t know what *pesadilla* is.”

“You don’t think *fantasía* means fantasy?” I said.

“That’d be too easy,” Ming said, with a faint smile. “Maybe? I don’t know. We should ask Sofia. I miss being able to do Google translations. But that isn’t the only one. Check this out.”

On the first page of a large print version of Bloodsport by Dick Francis, someone penciled out the following in block letters.

Seven of us Paul Loomis Mary Fenton Sue and Hunter Strickland Rich Grand Rob and Katie Fast March 1986 "Worst Spring Break Ever We're Just Another Job, That's What He Said."

“This one doesn’t seem quite so ominous,” Peter said, squinting. “More like a bad online review.”

“You want ominous?” Ming asked. She chucked him a dog-eared copy of a Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In the gutter between text and the edge, *DON'T TRUST THE OLD MAN* was scrawled, in smudged pencil, on every single page.

“Okay,” Peter said, “That’s a little creepy.”

In a paperback German version of 100 Years of Solitude, the first five pages flowered with neat Cyrillic handwriting that none of us could read. Pages six through ninety were torn out of the book.

“Just when things were getting good!” Peter said.

“You read... that?” Ming asked. Peter just laughed. We moved on.

The original cover for a book titled Secret of Terror Castle was missing. On the first page, a shaky hand scored and underscored a single phrase: *We are dead and Our Judgement waits inside the Grove*.

"What do you think?" Ming said. Peter shrugged. "You don't think it's fascinating? All these little notes, in different handwriting, all talking about crazy stuff?"

"Weird and a little creepy," Peter said. He unscrewed the cap of the flask he'd adopted, offered it to both Ming and me. We refused. He indulged.

"What about you?" Ming asked me.

"It's only been three days," I said. "And I am not going to freak out." I put a book with the face torn off on the stack on Ming's bedside table.

"You should have Fred take a look," Peter said. "He's guaranteed to have an opinion."

"Yeah, I don't want Fred blabbing to Oliveros, though," Ming said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"She thinks the 'old man' from the inscription in the Bible is Oliveros," Peter said. Ming shook her head.

"I don't know what to think," Ming said, "But I've never trusted Oliveros. He's never not nice? But there's just something off."

"I think he's a sweet old man," Peter said. "Who hasn't gotten laid this century. If he looks at you kinda funny, it's probably because of that hot ass of yours, beautiful."

"I know when a guy wants me," Ming said, matter of fact. "This isn't that." I looked away, hoping no one saw my face. I felt sick. If Ming really did know when guys liked her? She knew, must have known, at least one of the times I almost kissed her. But she didn't respond, so... Ming wasn't attracted to me. Ming didn't want me.

Peter didn't notice my distress. Or maybe he did and just decided to give me a break. He could be nice, when he wasn't busy being a jackass.

"If Oliveros wanted to drug us or poison us, he's been doing all the cooking. He's had plenty of opportunities. He hasn't. What would we be doing if he wasn't here to teach us all this survival shit? I think he's trustworthy."

"You got quiet," Ming said.

I felt her looking at me. The standard Kevin move in this situation was to meet Ming's eyes and give her a quick, reassuring smile that says hey pal, no problem, no drama here! But after three days on that island, when the only thing that felt certain was Ming's complete lack of interest in me, I didn't feel obliged to be nice and tell her I was doing fine.

Peter didn't let the silence linger.

"You're reading too much into stuff," Peter told Ming. "The old man is harmless. Tomorrow, when the rescue team arrives, you're going to feel really silly about all this," he waved at her collection of books. "And Kevin and I are going to tease you mercilessly."

"God can you imagine?" Ming said. "If a helicopter actually came? If we could get out of here? And get in touch with our families and all the people we left behind? If that happened, I wouldn't care, you could tease me all you want."

"Rescue is coming," Peter said. "We just have to sit tight and stay calm. Probably best if we didn't show anybody else the creepy text in the margins."

"Especially not Fred," Ming said.

"Especially not Fred," Peter agreed.

Making yeast from scratch

1. *Combine three spoons of flour and two spoons of coconut water in jar with loose lid or wet cloth over cover.*
2. *Three times during the first day, stir the mixture. Let sit overnight.*
3. *On the second day, add three spoons of flour and two spoons of well water to mixture.*
4. *Three times during the second day, stir the mixture. Let sit overnight. You will begin to see changes to the mixture, including bubbling and significant rising and a pungent odor. Bubbling and odor will diminish before starter is ready for use.*
5. *Repeat steps 3 & 4 on days three, four and five. Test the mixture by dropping some in water; when the drop floats, the starter is ready.*

Peter told Fred about Ming's discovery the next day.

"Fred was being a bitch," Peter said, casually, as the three of us huddled in Ming's room after dinner. "First thing he said, looking at the notes in the margins: 'These look like props from a cheap escape room. Next thing you know,'" Peter said, "Fred has Brianna pulling every book off the shelves in the lobby and stacking them up around the sofa in the lobby where Fred sits. I was working with Oliveros," Peter said. "I guess he made soup that morning? Or started some? Around noon, he took us back to the house so he could stir the pot. When we found Fred dozing, surrounded by towers of books? The old man froze. He asked Fred what was going on. Fred told him not to worry about it." Peter laughed. "Such a Fred answer! 'You'll get paid,' he told the old man. 'If we get a little messy? Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of you. Make you whole. Comprende? You'll get your goddamn money.'" Peter shook his head. "The old man looked at him, and for just a second I thought he was going to go all kung fu martial artist and tear out Fred's heart with his bare hand. But he spun around on his heel, and he didn't talk to us for a couple hours after that." Peter looked at me. "Why does Brianna put up with Fred?" I shook my head.

"Why are you asking me?"

"You two used to be together. You must have some insight into the woman."

"Dude, she dumped me," I said. Ming shifted uncomfortably beside me.

Peter held up a hand, put a finger to his lips. We hushed. We heard the sound of muffled shouting, coming up through the floor boards. "That's Fred and Oliveros," Peter whispered. "We have to hear what they're saying." I wasn't sure that we did, but I didn't argue. I followed Ming and Peter into the hall. The three of crept down the front staircase as Fred shouted at Oliveros.

"What do you care what condition the place is in? Can you really not get it through that thick fucking head that rescue is on its way?" Beneath my feet, the stairs creaked. Peter and Ming shot me dirty looks, but when the old man glanced up and saw us he didn't seem upset.

"Please," Oliveros said, to Peter, Ming and I. "Come down." To Fred: "I do not wish to upset you. Injuries to the head can be troublesome. I apologize for questioning you about the books. I can always put them away myself."

"No," Fred said. "Don't touch them. I've got them sorted a special way."

Sober, Fred was incisive and brilliant but hardly methodical, unless he'd changed his ways since college. And he hadn't stopped smoking opium since Oliveros loaned him the pipe.

"Fred, my man," I said, "I was going to stroll out to the outhouses. I figure it must be a bitch, trying to get out there with crutches, so if you wanted my help..."

"Thanks, my man," Fred said, doing a bad imitation of my voice. "But I don't recall asking for your help."

"Just trying to be considerate," I said. Fred made a 'pfffft' sound.

"Bullshit," he said, "You're trying to distract me."

"I figured I could be considerate while also distracting you from what sounds like a pretty silly argument," I said.

Oliveros cleared his throat.

"I am going to bed," the old man said, with dignity. "We can resolve the matter of the lobby tomorrow."

"Or we can resolve it right now," Fred said, but the old man didn't turn around or give any indication he'd heard. He slipped behind the counter and disappeared into the back. He took his lamp with him, and I was grateful to whoever built a fire in the lobby's fireplace; because without that light, we would have been lost in the shadows.

"Come on, Fred," Brianna said. "You're acting like an ass."

"You come on," Fred began. B. wasn't having any. Fred started to frown, but he stopped when Brianna's lips thinned. "Fine," he said. "I'll shut up." He sounded pouty.

"Sweetheart," Brianna said, with a faint hint of reprimand in her voice, but balanced and maybe even overpowered by affection and good humor. The combination worked on Fred.

"I think it's the opium that's making me extra sensitive," Fred said.

"So maybe smoke less?" I said. Wrong thing to say. Fred's mood shifted. He glared at me.

"You have no idea what kind of pain I'm in," he said. I held up my hands, palms out.

"No, I do not," I said. "And I'm not passing judgement. If you need the dope, smoke up. But if you don't need it, the stuff makes you... you just don't seem sharp," I finished. "Or happy."

"You still going to the gym?" Fred asked me. "Back home, I mean. How many hours a week do you spend in a gym, watching yourself work out in a mirror?"

"Fred," Brianna said.

"I'm just trying to remind Kevin that he and I don't always have the same philosophical approach to life," Fred said. He looked me in the eye, and I saw how much he wanted to argue with someone. "And that's cool, right?"

"Sure," I said. "You do what's right for you."

"I will," Fred said, "And I don't need you or anyone else pressuring me to skimp on the pain meds because of your weird ideas about what being 'healthy' means." I laughed, a little.

"Are you really saying going to a gym makes me weird?" What I didn't say was: my therapist told me to start working out. I don't go to the gym for my looks! But I wasn't about to say anything about therapy to Fred. He'd just figure a way to use it against me.

"Yes," Fred said. "I think it's vain. Pointless. How much longer do you live because of each workout? Impossible to say, right, but does it really seem plausible that the time you've bought yourself is more than the hour and a half you spend in the gym? You're not there for your health. You're there to make yourself conform to an artificial standard of male beauty. None of the shit you do in a gym helps you at work or brings retirement closer. The only thing it might do is help you get laid... but only with an equally superficial female."

"I'm not going to apologize for looking after myself," I said. "Or for suggesting you do the same. But I'm also not going to argue with you any more, Fred. Not tonight."

Day five, I didn't get out of bed when I woke up. I didn't answer the knock on my door a short while later, or answer Sofia when she called out to me. To my surprise (and relief) she didn't let herself into my room. She went away.

I was divided inside, one voice saying hey, get up, get going, the situation is not ideal but could be worse while another, much louder, bass voice said ugh. Why even bother? People always use the metaphor of the world losing color to talk about depression, but it's bullshit. Great black and white prints can be just as spectacular as color, just as revealing and moving. Depression doesn't allow for genuine insights into yourself, or new and startling insights. You get stuck running on circular tracks, looping through moments everyone else has forgotten. You can't forgive yourself for bad behavior that looks worse every time you play back the memory.

My dad quit smoking when I was ten, over Labor Day weekend. He distracted himself with lollipops, and of course I stole a couple. He flipped when he went to the bag and it was empty. My tongue was purple, so denial was not going to be plausible. My dad went to grab me and if my mom hadn't stopped him, I think he might have smacked me. When he got back from

an emergency trip to the convenience store for Charms Blow Pops (grape flavor) he promised my Mom and me that he'd be better after the first forty-eight hours passed. That was when the physical addiction issues eased up, and according to my Dad the psychological aspect of addiction would be easier for him.

A year later, he admitted to me he still fought off urges to smoke. How long, I wondered, until my body adjusted to a lack of antidepressants? I wanted to blame my abrupt mood shift on the meds. I heard the same bass voice murmuring that I was being lazy. Pathetic. Unmanly.

Also, that I was an awful, awful person for stealing my Dad's Blow Pops when he was trying to quit smoking.

Around noon, another knock at my door.

"Kevin!" Sofia called out. "Are you there?" I wanted to burrow back into the bed. But I marshalled all my energy.

"I'm here," I called back. "Come on in."

The door cracked. Sofia peeked. "I'm decent," I said, sitting upright. She stepped in.

"Hello, Kevin," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm sorry about this morning," I said. "I don't know what my problem was, I just couldn't get out of bed."

"Maybe you needed the sleep?" Sofia said, tilting her head.

"Maybe..." I said, confused. I wasn't expecting kindness! I had Sofia down as a tough, no-nonsense type, like my boss back home. I was expecting a reprimand. Not sympathy.

"You push yourself," Sofia said. "Your friends, Peter, Brianna, they think you push yourself too hard."

"I don't know about that," I said, struggling still to respond. Sofia nodded, got up.

"It is true," she said. "Sleep as much as you need. We have been through a terrible ordeal, Kevin. All of us. And we all must find ways to heal on our own."

"Yeah," I said, embarrassed to find my stupid eyes filling up with tears.

"Okay," Sofia said, patting my sheets. "Come downstairs only when you are ready."

I've been called all sorts of names in my life, and though you never stop hearing the slurs and the shit talk, you learn over time to care less about what some stupid racist jackass thinks.

Kindness, though? The stuff killed me.

I came downstairs in the middle of the afternoon; guilt made me volunteer to help with dinner duty, with the caveat that I didn't know to cook. I chopped wood for the stove, carried buckets of water from the well to the kitchen, but the highlight of my culinary contribution to the

evening came when I stirred the pot with the handmade linguini while Oliveros was busy searing fish.

"Did you put salt in the water?" Cyndia asked me. I shook my head.

"Gotta ask him," I said, pointing to Oliveros. "I'm clueless. Just doing what I'm told."

"You know how to set the table?" Cyndia asked me.

Peter found me laying out silverware. His nose and arms looked raw from sunburn, but he winked at me.

"Look who got his ass out of bed," he said. "The spoon goes to the right of the knife."

"Yeah," I said. "I feel really bad that other people had to cover for me."

"Oh my God," Peter said. "Shut up. I was teasing."

"I feel bad," I repeated.

"Your conscience is adorable," Peter said. "But honest to God, you've got no reason to apologize."

"None whatsoever," Ming echoed. She held her arms out to me, and I gladly accepted the hug. "I missed work today, too," she said. "Insomnia last night. Didn't fall asleep until after Mike and Oliveros went out to tend the animals."

"Neither of you missed anything," Peter said. "Even Fred was quiet. I think everybody's a little freaked out."

"Five days," I said. "I can't even think about my parents, what they must be going through."

"Today is my Dad's birthday," Ming said. "If my parents weren't worried before, they will be after today."

"I keep trying to think of things we could do to let people know we're here," Peter said. "You ever see, in movies, people spell out help with stones on a beach? I went to do that on the beach near the fire pit-"

"Same place we saw the crocodile?" I asked.

"Same place," Peter said. "Took me about fifteen minutes of clearing away seaweed to realize somebody already did the whole spell out the word help in rocks thing. Over and over, down the beach, as far as I went."

"Thank you, Peter," Ming said. "For that cheerful bit of news."

"My pleasure," Peter said. "Hey, I'm going down to the beach, take a quick dip. Either of you interested?"

"Yes," Ming said.

“Not me,” I said, but Ming grabbed my arm.

“Not optional,” she said. “You do not smell fresh.”

“Fine,” I said. “Probably a good idea if someone is keeping an eye out for crocodiles.” Peter snickered.

"Once we're in the water, apparently, it's the sharks we have to worry about," Peter said.

"You both suck," Ming said. "I'm going to enjoy my swim, damn it."

Fred and Brianna didn't join us for dinner on day five. Mike wolfed down some food and went to bed early. The rest of us, including Oliveros, listened as Peter told us about parrots he saw while collecting wood.

"Green bodies, yellow heads and a look in their eyes like, yes, I am an outrageously cute little bastard and I know it." Peter smiled wide enough his teeth showed, which meant he was genuinely tickled by his memory of the birds. "They did a bunch of standard parrot stuff. Lifting up one claw like they wanted a high five, turning their heads at impossible angles and then one guy, hanging onto a branch, slowly extended his wings so you could see every feather..."

"I would never have guessed you're a nature lover," Cyndia said.

"Yeah, well," Peter said. "Not usually. But these guys were so full of life. And then they started singing Fallin', the old Teenage Fanclub collaboration with De La Soul. You guys remember that one?" Oliveros frowned.

I laughed, but I was the only one. Everyone else looked uncomfortable.

"He's kidding. You're kidding," I said to Peter. He shrugged.

"When they finished the song, they wanted to talk," Peter said.

"Peter," Ming started. Cyndia must not have heard her. She leaned towards Peter.

"What did the parrots say to you?" Cyndia asked.

"Build a boat. Get off the island. Get away from... here," Peter finished, looking away from Oliveros.

"Did the parrots perform a second musical number after offering this advice?" Oliveros asked.

"I'm not ... I know the most likely explanation is I imagined the whole thing," Peter said. "But the scene is so vivid in my mind. The lead parrot rapping, the other two parrots bobbing their heads in the background. Once in a while, one flashed a contour feather in support." Peter laughed. "You guys remember the line about a washed up rapper? So appropriate. We're literally washed up right now." Oliveros tilted his head.

"Peter," he said. "I am beginning to be concerned about you, my son. You are an adult and it is not my place to insist you quit drinking or smoking opium or whatever you are doing..."

"Haven't smoked any dope since I got here," Peter said, brightly. "Didn't drink any booze today. Woke up feeling great."

"It's the..." Lithium, I thought but realized just in time I shouldn't blurt out to everyone. "Clean living."

"You're having delusions, Peter," Cyndia said. "You may feel good now-"

"Not good. Great. I feel amazing. But I know how it goes. At some point, I'm going to feel unbelievably down, but I don't at the moment so why not seize the day, as they say?"

"Dude, you're just screwing with us, right?" I asked. "You didn't actually hear parrots do a hip hop song."

"Teenage Fanclub is technically an alternative rock band," Peter said, "But I think with De La Soul providing most of the vocals you've got to classify the song as hip-hop." He laughed again. "Jesus, you should see your faces."

"If you're having trouble telling what's real and what's your imagination, then honey, that's nothing to laugh about." Cyndia's tone was more gentle than usual.

"If you're saying I 'lost touch with reality and now my personality is an unwanted commodity...'," Peter said.

"He's quoting the song's lyrics," Ming told Cyndia. "He's screwing with us."

"Isn't it possible," Peter said. "That I live a magical life? That because I'm open minded the universe chooses to show me wonders denied to people with closed minds?"

"Do birds singing a popular song really constitute a wonder?" Oliveros asked. "With all due respect, this seems to me more like a minor novelty."

"The parrots didn't like you, either," Peter said, seriously, but then the smile came back.

"Just kidding!" Oliveros grunted. The old man pushed his chair back.

"Of course," he said to Peter. "You must forgive me, I am not as young as I once was, and I have never been much for joking and hijinks. I am suddenly sleepy; can I count on you good people to clear the dishes? There is a little washing up to do left, but..."

"We've got it," Ming said.

"Thank you," Oliveros said. "I wish you all a good night's sleep."

We listened as footsteps receded, hinges creaked open and doors swung shut.

"I think you pissed the old man off," Ming told Peter. He shrugged.

"Some people just don't understand whimsy," Peter said.

"Mental illness isn't a joke," Cyndia said.

"I don't think Peter is making fun of people with mental illness," I said. I wanted him to clue in Cyndia about his struggles; Peter didn't seem so inclined.

"I'll help with the dishes," Peter told Ming.

"I'll help, too," Cyndia said.

"You worked all day," I told her, feeling freshly guilty about my inability to get out of bed. "Kick back. Let the rest of us help."

In the kitchen, using a rag to dry the plates Peter handed me, he laughed, softly, out of nowhere.

"Last time I share my secret world with Cyndia," he said.

"She means well," I said, unsure why I felt obliged to defend her.

"Everybody does," Peter said, and I wasn't sure if I heard acceptance or resignation, resentment or good humor.

"It's just a little freaky, even for me, hearing you talk about parrots talking to you," I went on.

"I get it," Peter said. "You don't have to worry, Kevin."

"I don't?" I said, skeptically.

"Nope," Peter said. "The parrots like you, buddy."

At dinner on the sixth, Fred left his plate untouched. He slouched in his chair, but he kept quiet until Oliveros finished the blessing. "Amen," Fred said, loudly. "What's in the grove?" The table got quiet. Oliveros picked his napkin up, put it in his lap. He shrugged.

"I have never been inside," Oliveros said. "So I cannot provide any details. All I can say with certainty that is nothing inside the grove for humanity but death."

"It's not the way out?" Fred said, casually. "That's what someone wrote in one of the books, that it was the center and the only way out was through the center."

"That makes this island sound like Dante's Inferno," Oliveros said. "I think the views here, the wildlife, the sunsets- perhaps even the food - these are a little more pleasant than the nine circles Dante described. Do you not think?" His smile made me want to smile back. Fred wasn't having any.

"If you know what's out there," Fred said. "You should tell us. Before we do something stupid like go take a look ourselves."

"I do not think you are making any trips anytime soon," Oliveros said, with a pointed look at Fred's splinted leg. "And I am grateful you cannot go. I have seen wiser and more rugged men than you die trying to unlock the mystery of the island."

"What the fuck do you know?" Fred said.

"I know my own limitations," Oliveros said.

"Do you?" Fred said.

"I also know, with some certainty, that we are prisoners," Oliveros said. "And there is no way off this island except through death."

"That sounds like some old-fashioned superstitious bullshit," Fred said. "You really don't believe there's a way off the island. Do you think the place is cursed or some shit? Or just the people who wash up here?" Oliveros shut his eyes for a moment.

"I am, no doubt, old fashioned. I come from a different, rougher era. I do not know what you mean by superstitious. I do not believe human eyes see the world as it is truly is. We are corks, bobbing in an ocean, with worlds above and below us we can never touch. We try to make sense of our shallow bobbing and because we are small and flawed, we come up with answers that are flawed. Answers that are bullshit." Fred frowned.

"Cool speech. What's in the grove at the center of the island?" Oliveros sat quiet for a while before he spoke.

"A religious man might wonder if there is a divine power guarding the Grove at the center of this island, just as God instructed cherubim to bar mankind from entering Eden after Adam and Eve's transgression." Mr. Oliveros opened his mouth to go on; Fred cut him off.

"An angel? On this island. That's why ships don't fly over? Because of an angel?"

"I am trying to answer your question as best I can," Oliveros said. Fred opened his mouth to cut the old guy off again. Cyndia didn't let him.

"Come on, Fred," Cyndia said. "Let Mr. Oliveros talk." Fred glared at her.

"When you choose to believe that everything in the world will turn out great in the end because some sky ghost is watching," Fred said. "You're screwing the rest of us living on the planet. Tough problems don't get solved by prayer. Tough problems get solved by humans working hard. Making hard choices. If prayer helps you sleep better at night, good for you, but don't pretend it's accomplishing anything real."

"Sleeping better isn't something real?" Cyndia said.

"You know what I mean," Fred said.

"I think you got pissed off when Mr. Oliveros said he'd met smarter guys than you," Cyndia said. "And now you're trying to troll him."

"All I want," Fred said, "Is to know what our host here thinks is inside the Grove. If angels is all he's got, cool. I'm thinking there's probably a more rational explanation for whatever is going on with this island."

"Do you consider yourself a scientific man, then, Mr. Huntington?" Oliveros asked. "Then perhaps I should say the two surviving visitors to the Grove, the only two to make it back here out of more than thirty, reported profound psychotropic experiences and suffered such severe physical and psychological trauma that both died within days of being rescued." The old man dipped his head at Fred. "Whatever I can do to put you at ease."

"What did they say?" Fred said. Oliveros shook his head.

"Who?"

"The ones who came back from the Grove. Who were they? What did they say?" The old man took a sip from his glass.

"Neither one told a coherent story," Oliveros said. "The man, I think he was Italian? He returned to us a month after disappearing, dressed in a judge's robes, delirious and starved. He warned me, with tears in his eyes, not to trust the General or the Bishop. When I asked him, which General, which Bishop, he could not answer. He died the same night he returned. The woman who came back to us was physically sound, but her mind gone. She could not sleep without waking up screaming. At night, even the light of a fire gave her no comfort. Every shadow held horrors." Oliveros frowned. "After a week, she walked into the ocean with stones in the pockets of her sweater."

"And you think angels are responsible?" Fred said.

"I am not claiming any special knowledge," Oliveros said. "I was proud once. After my time here, though... I have been humbled. Only asking that you, my guests, be mindful of the dangers of the island. You are, of course, free to do as you please."

Making flour from wheat

1. *Harvest plant. To assist in threshing (step 3) bundle stalks together with flowering ends pointed in the same direction.*
2. *Dry plants*
3. *Thresh, i.e., using a sieve or filter, separate stalk from wheat berries and casings*
4. *Winnnow out lighter elements (casings, stalk) from mix until you are left with hardened wheat berries.*
5. *Grind wheat berries into powder (flour).*

On the seventh day, Brianna shook me awake. The sun wasn't up. The only light came from an oil lamp Brianna raised.

"Fred's gone," B. said. "I think that asshole Peter must have taken him to that goddamn grove. Get up, Kevin! We need to get after them!" Her hair was wild, and the shadows under her eyes looked like bruises.

She looked crazy.

"Slow down," I told Brianna. I brushed at the crustie bits in the corners of my eyes and tried to process. "How are you so sure that Fred and Peter took off?"

"The Land Rover is gone," Brianna said. I saw her muddy feet but morning me still had to ask.

"You went outside and checked?"

"Ever since Peter showed Fred those stupid messages in the books, Fred's been obsessed with this grove bullshit. He told me he wanted to drive out there, and I thought he was just high. He was high, he's been goddamn high all the time since we got here. Peter is a terrible influence on him. I never should have let Fred stay up late partying with him." She let her lantern drop, and shadows skittered around the room.

"So what do you want us to do?" I asked, softly, trying to be careful with what I said. I wanted B to feel supported, but I wasn't sure what I could do beside be a sympathetic listening ear. Even as my feet touched the floorboards, a secret, shameful part of me wished B had gone to Cyndia.

"The car left tracks in the ground," she told me. "Big, obvious tracks. We need to follow them."

I got a bad feeling. How did B plan on catching up with the boys? What if they came home a different way than they left, and we missed each other? Had B missed all our discussions about the reptilian apex predators infesting the island? I knew she wasn't in great shape, emotionally. I wondered if she was hitting the opium pipe with Fred.

"Let's go downstairs," I said. "Talk about it."

"We need to hurry," Brianna said.

"Maybe," I said, "Or maybe we should wait for the guys with the only functioning car on the island to drive back from wherever they went." Brianna's face clouded over. I didn't want a fight. "Tell you what," I said, "How about we ask Mr. Oliveros for advice? He's usually up super early. If he thinks we should go after Fred, we pack a picnic basket, maybe a tent, and we chase him down."

"Fred's in trouble," Brianna said. "Tell anyone else I said so, and I'll call you a liar, but I can tell, Kevin. I just know. He's out there, and he needs us."

"Okay," I said, "I hear you. Let's go downstairs, and see if Oliveros has any advice." Brianna stepped into the hall, and I followed a step behind. No light came from the windows. Brianna's lamp was our only source of light.

"I could kill Peter," Brianna said, loudly. "I could kill him!" Hinges creaked, floorboards squeaked and a door in the hall swung open.

"You can try to kill me," Peter said. "But I'd really prefer if you waited until a civilized hour."

There was a moment, a brief one, when Brianna could have defused the situation. A heartfelt apology or a promise to do better about rushing to judgement might have restored Peter's natural good humor.

"I don't have time for this," Brianna said. She continued down the hall.

"Peter, man," I said. "I'm sorry. She's freaking out."

"Why are you apologizing for her?" Peter asked me, cheeks flushed. I shook my head. He slammed his door in my face. Down the hall, I heard another door open. I glanced over to see Ming retreating back into her room.

Downstairs, B wasn't hearing what she wanted from Oliveros.

"You must not try to follow them," he told her. "Certainly not in the dark!"

"Dark didn't stop Fred," Brianna said. Oliveros' eyes filled with sympathy.

"Your friend made an unwise choice. Do not compound his mistake."

"I can't just sit here," Brianna said.

"Even if just sitting here is the best thing you can do for your fiance?" I cleared my throat.

"There's other things we can do while we wait," I said. "Pack some food. Borrow a tent, if you have one, Mr. Oliveros. Get stuff ready so if we want to move out, we can go fast."

"Very wise," Mr. Oliveros said. B wasn't thrilled, but I told her this was clearly the better approach. I believed what I said, too, right until an hour or so after dawn, when we spotted the thin column of smoke on the horizon, coming from the heart of the island.

"Do you see that?" Brianna asked Oliveros. He nodded.

"I do, indeed. Seventy kilometers or so inland, I think. The southeastern edge of the grove."

"How far is that in miles?" I asked.

"Probably a twelve or fourteen hour hike," Sofia said. "Depending on the terrain."

"We should leave as soon as we can," Brianna said.

"We can't all go," Peter said.

"I didn't ask you," Brianna said. Peter studied Brianna for a minute, then slapped his thighs and got up from his chair.

"All righty, then," Peter said. He stalked outside. The screen door banged shut. Ming leaned forward in her chair.

"I don't know why you're giving him such a hard time," she said, to Brianna.

"I don't know why you're always taking Peter's side," B said.

"The fishing lines have been checked and reset and the chickens fed, but there are still many chores that must be done," Oliveros said. "If you insist on finding the source of the smoke, of course I cannot stop you, but-

"I'm going with you," Sofia said, to Brianna. The old man trailed off. He looked surprised at the interruption, but not offended.

"You don't have to come along," B said.

"No, of course not. I am not doing this as an employee." Sofia smiled. "But I would not say no to a generous bonus when this is all over."

"I'm coming, too," I said to B. I glanced over at Ming and saw the hard look on her face. I took a breath, braced for backlash. "But I gotta say, Brianna, I agree with Ming on this one. You're being really harsh with Peter, and I don't know what he did to deserve it."

"Somebody helped Fred," Brianna said.

"Who isn't here?" Ming asked. "Besides Fred, I've seen everyone this morning, except for Cyndia and Mikey."

"Hey," Cyndia said, coming down the staircase, radiating peace and composure. "What's going on?"

"Fred's in trouble," Brianna told her.

"Mike worked with Peter repairing the Land Rover," I said. "And I know Mike feels super guilty about the shipwreck."

"Fred guilted Mike into going out for a joyride in the middle of the night on an island filled with wild animals," Ming said. "That sounds about right." Brianna frowned.

"Fred could be in real trouble. Mikey, too. Maybe we can wait to make fun of them until after we're on the road?" Brianna said.

"I'm coming along," Cyndia declared.

"No," Brianna said. "Absolutely not." She and Cyndia stared at each and communicated in some way invisible to me, but that resulted in Cyndia conceding to B. I made a note to circle back on why B didn't want Cyndia along. But I wanted to push on.

"Then me, Brianna, and Sofia are going, then," I said. "Mr. Oliveros, tell me you have one more backpack."

He did not, so we improvised with a pillow sack and took just a few minutes to balance the load we packed in the pre-dawn hours. Brianna puffed out her cheeks, shifted from foot to foot, checked the horizon, and otherwise did everything she could to convey impatience short of screaming at us to hurry up. I would have preferred yelling, honestly.

"There is no fresh water until you are quite close to your destination," Oliveros said. He handed Sofia and I battered canteens that looked like they belonged to a World War Two movie. I shook mine experimentally. I felt liquid sloshing around, but the seal seemed tight. "Follow the tire tracks as much as you can. Snakes hide in high grass. You should not run into any crocodiles, at least not until you come near the river, and the grove. Make camp before sundown, and be sure to build a good sized fire every night."

"You could always come with us," I said. He shook his head.

"My place is here," he said.

"Find our lost dorks," Ming whispered in my ear, when we got set to leave and the hugs got handed out.

"I'll try," I told her. Peter slapped me on the back, while Cyndia and Brianna clinched up tight.

"Better you than me," Peter said, in my ear. He snickered, stalked off. I took a deep breath, prepared myself mentally to lead the ladies on our rescue mission in the jungle.

"Come on, Kevin," Brianna called out. "Time to go."

"Don't be a slow foot, now," Sofia said to me.

The thought occurred to me that maybe I should focus on keeping up with Sofia and B, and not worry so much about leadership per se.

We followed the Land Rover's trail through the same stand of hardwoods where Peter, Ming and I dropped a tree, then into an open, grassy plain only occasionally dotted with stands of trees. Edging along the twin ruts left in soft dirt by the Land Rover, I felt eyes on me from every direction. The mud closing over my rubber boots was the island, slurping at my feet, wanting a taste. Bugs bit my neck, arms, hands, anywhere skin was exposed.

"We should have brought some of the old man's bug bite lotion," I said. "I'm getting chewed up."

"I am as well," Sofia said. "But if this is the most important thing we missed packing, I will be happy."

"Did I screw up?" Brianna asked. "Did I rush out of camp too fast this morning?" I didn't meet her eyes, because I didn't know what to say. Honestly, my answer was yes, B, you did rush our departure. Planning pays off! But what good did it do to say any of that? We couldn't change things now. More importantly, maybe; Brianna was never going to be the kind of person who stayed calm, planned and acted judiciously. Her heart was too big to be reined in by her head.

"You did not screw up," Sofia said. She mopped at her forehead. The dew of the morning was gone, the sun wasn't close to noon, but I was already dripping sweat. Sofia seemed the least bothered of the three of us; after the first hour of walking, she pulled her hair into a braid, but that was her only concession to the heat. "There's only so much planning one can do in a crisis moment."

"And we did need to get going," I said, surprised by my own sudden generosity. "This is a long ass hike." B turned back and flashed a smile at me.

"You're lying to make me feel better," she said.

"We can live without bug bite lotion," I said. I scratched at my right forearm; my fingertips came away bloody. "Though a distraction might be nice."

"What do you think is in that grove?" Sofia asked. I groaned. I was getting tired of hearing about the damn grove. If it wasn't for the mystery of the grove, we could have been back at the hotel, drinking big glasses of water with lemon wedges floating inside!

"Nothing," Brianna said. "Not a damn thing. Back home, Fred likes to get high and watch these shows where guys go around the world hunting for Atlantis and the Lost City of Gold and spoiler alert, they never find anything. Because they aren't real, they're just made up places in fictional stories. It's so stupid. It's like watching a Lord of the Rings movie and then deciding to spend the rest of your life hunting for Hobbitwood."

I really wanted to tell B that there wasn't such a thing as Hobbitwood, but I restrained myself.

"When Fred watches that crap at home, I just go into the next room. No big deal. But now..." Brianna shook her head. Sofia nodded.

"I am thinking either it is nothing at all, or maybe something to do with psychedelic plants or animals..."

"Psychedelic animals?" I said.

"Some frogs give off secretions that make humans hallucinate," Sofia said.

"Do they really?" I said.

"We should be careful," Sofia said. "And avoid eating or drinking anything when we are close to this grove. Some people think ergot in bread caused hallucinations for the settlers in Salem, the ones who held the witch trials."

"No eating, no drinking, get Fred, get out," Brianna said. She swore, creatively, for almost thirty seconds. "That was aimed at Fred, not you guys," she said. "What do you think, Kevin? You think there's an angel waiting in the grove? Making fantasies come true, or keeping people out, or maybe something else?"

"I don't think there's any angels on this island," I said. I thought for a second. "Except maybe for Cyndia," I said. Brianna laughed.

"She's no angel," she said.

"Details?" I said.

"Ask her yourself," B said. "You guys ready for a break? I just want a mouthful of water, I know we've got to conserve."

The trail got harder to decipher. Around noon, on stony ground, we walked without seeing any sign for close to an hour. On the verge of turning back, we saw a telltale tire track in a pile of animal scat. The ground got softer, trees grew up around us, and overhead birds chattered to one another. Parrots swiveled bright yellow heads. Black ball-bearing eyes swivelled as we passed. The parrots made sharp noises at us. A chorus of insects, mostly unseen, swelled and diminished along with the greenery in the background. Sofia and Brianna both looked sexy as hell, but I pretended I didn't notice. We talked about the stuff we missed, like cars and our smart phones, ice cream and air conditioning and clean underwear. Brianna told Sofia the story of the night we met; she made Fred, Peter and I sound like complete nerds. I tried to correct the record but realized pretty quickly I was just making myself look worse.

"Go on and laugh," I said. Brianna and Sofia stopped short. I almost walked past, but both of them grabbed me.

I caught a glimpse of something huge and serpentine slithering into the brush.

"What was that?" I said.

"A large snake," Sofia said. "But it is gone. We should move on."

None of us moved.

"We only have a couple of hours of good sunlight," Sofia said.

"So let's go," I said, but the three of us hung back until Brianna took the lead. Sofia and I followed a few steps behind.

I tried my best to be a good friend to Brianna. I was going to help her find Fred, I wasn't going to bail on her, but the glimpse of a giant damn snake freaked me out even more than the pop-eyed crocodiles. I kept thinking I heard branches overhead creaking with the weight of a giant constrictor, ready to drop and strangle.

We followed the tire tracks into a less densely wooded area. Sofia grabbed Brianna's shoulder.

"There," she said. "Do you see?"

In the distance, I saw black circles, gray smoke, and familiar, inorganic lines, but toy-sized.

"That's the Land Rover," I said.

"Fred!" Brianna said. She walked briskly, then broke into a trot. Sofia and I hurried to catch up.

I was hot and sweaty. Blisters between my toes ached enough to distract me from the stabbing pains in my heels and shins that I blamed on my rubber boots being borrowed and two sizes too big.

"Are you okay?" Sofia asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "Just a little cranky. Long day. How are you?"

"Ready to set up camp," Sofia said. She tilted her head toward Brianna, fifty yards ahead of us and pulling away. "I am sensing some resistance from Brianna."

"You want me to talk to her?" I said. Sofia looked me in the eye.

"Do you think that will help?" Her tone was light, and a smile was dancing around her lips. As filthy, achy and worn out as I was, I couldn't help but grin at her.

"Probably not," I said. "I don't think she's going to chill until she's back with Fred."

"He has to be with the Land Rover," Sofia said.

"Has to be," I said.

Fred wasn't with the Land Rover. No one was around. The jeep's grill was buried in a tree with a barrel-size trunk. A second tree lay on top of the jeep, roots exposed. When Sofia and I caught up, Brianna studied the scene, arms crossed.

I noted, just a mile or so away, an area so dense with trees that at dusk the whole of the wood seemed a singular, looming presence. I figured that had to be the grove.

"Fred!" B shouted. She took a breath, shouted his name again. "Francis Edward Huntington!"

"Fred!" Sofia echoed. She nodded at me, eyebrows up.

"Fred!" I hollered. Staring at the sun, sinking on the horizon, I felt a deep sense of fatalism. Night was coming, and we weren't going to get an answer.

"Guys!" A voice answered us, from somewhere close. Brianna looked at me, frowning.

"That's not Fred," she mouthed.

"We are by the Land Rover!" Sofia shouted.

"Who is that?" I asked Sofia, in a normal tone. She shook her head. I heard thrashing noises in the bush nearby. They got louder.

A figure burst out of the high grass.

"Michael!" Sofia said. B pulled him into a hug while I patted him on the back, awkwardly.

"I'm so sorry," he told Brianna. "I shouldn't have let Fred talk me into driving out here."

"Where is he? Is he okay?"

"He was okay when I left him," Mike said. He didn't seem real interested in meeting anyone's eyes.

"Where is he, Mikey?" B screamed. Sofia and I leaned back at the same time as Mike.

"He's in the grove," Mike said. He lifted his head, looked at Sofia. "He's not coming back."

"Where the hell is Fred?" B yelled, loud enough to set birds springing from the tree branches.

"I can't explain," Mike said, face beet red, "Because you wouldn't believe me." He shook his head when B started to argue. "You wouldn't believe me," he said.

I'd never heard Mike sound so sure of himself before. I'd never heard him say no to Brianna, either. She started to talk, to try to get him to change his mind, but he shook his head. "I can't tell you where he is," he said, with finality, "But I can lead you there. I can take you into the grove, okay?"

"First light, tomorrow morning," Sofia said. "We go." Mike nodded.

"No," Brianna said. "We go now."

"B," I said, "I know you're in a hurry but the sun is going down fast. We need to set up a camp, get a fire going-"

"Mike and I are going," Brianna said. "Right, Mike?" He chewed on his lip, but there was never much doubt about Mike caving.

"Okay," Mike said. "But we need to go as quick as we can."

"Let's go right now," B said.

"Think about this, Brianna," I said. "Dusk is when predators all come out-"

"Another reason to go right now," Brianna said. "You and Sofia stay here, set up a camp, whatever. I'm going."

"We are not splitting up," Sofia said.

"Absolutely not. We're coming with you," I told Brianna.

"Then let's go."

I heard the stream Oliveros mentioned long before I saw the silver split in the green and shadowy landscape. Even worried and exhausted a little piece of me registered the view as the kind of thing that inspired painters.

The view in front of me was not nearly so inspirational. The country where Mike led us grew increasingly dense and difficult to navigate. The trees towered over high grass, brambles and briars that whipped at your face and grabbed at your feet as you tried to pass. We went single file, Mike first, then me. Progress was slow and painful.

"Are you sure this is right?" I asked Mike. The sky was fading from light to dark blue. The day was done.

"Yeah, this is right," Mike said. He looked as miserable as I felt, with nasty red welts on his face, and two long rips in his t-shirt. "I thought we'd be here already but it must be just ahead here!"

"What's that?" Brianna shouted, from behind me. "Are we close?"

"Just keep going!" I yelled back. The thicket closed in around me until we fought through a tunnel of shrubbery. The light faded fast. Any forward movement at all required a furious blind struggle. At the edge of my hearing I heard a rushing sound, like the river but more whispery.

I stepped into open space. The sudden discrepancy made me stumble forward, into Mike. I looked around and froze.

I knew where we were.

Brianna crashed into me from behind. I stepped out of the way, but not before putting a hand on her shoulder, to steady her or maybe myself.

"What is going on?" Sofia said. She sounded bewildered.

Maybe she didn't recognize the narrow city streets, or the red brick buildings with prominent bay windows. I knew the place because Boston was where Fred and I and most of the others went to school, all those years ago. We stood on Comm Ave, outside the same building where we met freshmen year. Mike pointed up, to the eighth floor.

"If you're looking for Fred," Mike said, "He's in there. In your old dorm room. The one you guys shared freshman year."

*Continued in **Reverie Isle: Episode 103: "Dirty Water"***