



**Caye Caulker Island, Belize**  
**Tuesday, 10th January 2023**

**W**hen I lied to him for the first time, it sparkled off my tongue as sweet as popping candy. He didn't even know, he didn't catch it, and I hadn't planned to, not really. It just fell out of my mouth, and I wasn't sure why.

Maybe it was shame. Was it shame, or something stronger? A defensive move I'd learned—or a preemptive one—because women have that kind of sixth sense, don't they? Jacobson's organ. I read about that once, in one of Dad's *New Scientist* magazines, how females are predisposed to listen to their gut; how we can sense fear like we're about to be fed it.



Through broken clouds, the sun warmed the sea. Turquoise medicine. I breathed it all in, deep into my bones. Jet Skis wasped in the distance, irritating the flat blues beyond.

Aid lay next to me, five thousand miles of relaxed. Tattoos wrapped around his chest, his neck, his arms, commemorating untold stories with blood and pain and ink. The newest—soft black and grey roses—graced his bicep afresh below the “L.F.” heart. He was resting on his elbows, his foot tapping a rhythm to the music in his ears I couldn't hear.

He'd been distracted since we got to the island. When I'd asked over breakfast if he was nervous about meeting Dad, he insisted he wasn't, got annoyed with me for asking. He barely ate any of his pancakes though,

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left most of his coffee. I'd wanted to tell him about the restaurant then but thought against it, deciding to wait until we were all a bit more relaxed.

Low, ebbing reggae from the beach bar drowned out my tinnitus, but on the offbeats I could still feel the buzzing electrics; they were never not there. The audiologist had told me to ignore them—the crazed sounds in my head—but it's impossible to hear nothing when you're listening for silence.

Running in and out of the waves, the kids were embroidering the sand near the jetty. The breeze kissed salty-sweet with their giggles; with my hearing aids, I could just make them out.

A soundless breeze teased the palm fronds above us, their shadows dancing grey upon the sand—grittier than I remembered it—narrower, too; the beach a gentle hem dotted with picnic benches, clam chairs, and slack hammocks. We just sat on towels.

Aid pulled the headphones from his ears. "How you feeling?" He started zincing his face. "Being back here, I mean?"

"It's fine," I said. "It's good . . . I can't wait to see the south." A pelican squawked, eyeing up the fish below as it padded along the jetty.

"Ella seems relaxed." The children seemed to simply slide into this place, leave the sludge of London behind.

"She needs a break."

"We all do, but it is weird be again." I lost some of his words to the cawk of the pelican, but his New England accent felt stronger than usual.

Dylan was rushing up the beach towards us, kicking up the sand. "Aid, will you come back in the ea with ?"

"Sure, little man," Aid shouted. "Le m have a quick moke, then I'll be in." He turned to me. "When we mee ing your da ?"

I turned up my hearing aids. "I need to check with Chloe. She's got it all figured out."

"No shit." Aid pulled his tobacco pouch out of my beach bag.

"To be fair, she has organised the whole thing."

"I thought he might want to meet me first, before everyone else."

"She wants to do it like that, thinks it will be more fun . . . You sure you're not nervous?"

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“Let’s not stay on too long. Once we’re done with the party, let’s hit Placencia, like we said. Beaches are better there anyway.” Aid hadn’t wanted to come to Caye Caulker again, asked why we couldn’t have visited Dad down in the jungle, which is what I’d wanted to do, too. But my sister had her plan, and I knew better than to mess with it. Besides, I liked the idea of being back here on the island; Aid just wasn’t nostalgic like that.

“Do you want a coffee?” I asked.

He was rubbing the last of the sunscreen into his tattooed arms. “Yeah. Thanks.”

I cast my eye towards the children. “Anything else?”

He grabbed me by the back of the neck, pulling me closer. “A kiss.” Under the shade of passing clouds, we breathed each other in. He smelt of coconut and wood, a moreish musk I had to prise myself away from.

“I love you, Wylde,” he called after me as I made my way across the sand. “Wildly.” I turned to smile at him, his blue eyes tracking mine.

A young couple and their toddler beat me to the kiosk. She was beautiful, the woman. She looked Scandinavian, but they started speaking to each other in something else—German, maybe, or Dutch. Arguing with the girl about what she wanted to order, they were gesticulating back and forth between her and the faded ice-cream board. The sun so bright through the clouds, I had to squint to make out the scrawled chalk on the side of the hut: iced coffee, belikin, smoothies.

The girl started to whine, stomping her flip-flopped little foot. “Room-ijs, roomijs,” she singsonged.

I could feel my body acclimatising—sinking into the fortnight. It felt so good to be in a bikini, to finally be away. We hadn’t had the money to go abroad for so long, and now it felt even more precious. I tried not to think about what happened with Aktar and the restaurant, how we’d left things. This was pretty much paid for, so I’d enjoy it, worry about worrying when I was back home, but then, of course, I thought about Aktar, and the restaurant, and how we’d left things. Fuck. I needed to call him, needed to apologise again. And I needed to tell Aid.

He was lying flat then, deadening his cigarette butt into the sand. His body bragged incredible, even from this distance. I lost sight of it sometimes, but there was no doubt about it—people noticed him; and he liked

to be noticed. Three years in, all I had to do was look at him and my head still dissolved.

A heavy grit-grey had appeared as if from nowhere on the horizon. The kids were splashing each other now, kicking the water, not too deep. Ella, even at fourteen, still enjoyed playing with Dylan. I flashed in my mind to a day when I might no longer be able to hear them, my own children—the cruellest void imaginable. I had to remember this all.

“Nee!” The blond woman shouted in front of me, side-eyeing her husband, bending towards the girl who was stamping her other foot.

Ella was in deeper now, swimming closer to the jetty, where a speedboat was coming in from the distance. She looked so much taller than last time I’d seen her in a swimsuit, her limbs impossibly long. Only a few years ago, she’d been so clingy, so wholly dependent on me; now though, she was blooming wildly—so enigmatic and ripe with possibilities.

The boat whipped close by the tip of the dock, an aftermath of waves gathering and spilling.

A woman in a red bikini got up from a nearby table, her chair pushed back. She took a final draining sup of coffee and tossed down her newspaper, the pages rustling in the gathering breeze. The title caught my eye, *Amandala*, and then the headline:

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**Shooting on Logwood Street. Man Dead. Police Hunt for Zabaneh.**

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“Roouooooom-ijs,” the toddler screamed in front of me until it pierced into my ears. The water was picking up now, cascading over the sand. Ella was up to her chest, rising and falling, defensive against the newly violent sea. I scoured the shoreline, thick grey clouds bruising the sky behind. *Where’s Dylan?*

A chill riptided through me. I swept my eyes back and forth, colours blurring. I could still make out Ella, disappearing up and down in the waves. But no Dylan.

I started walking fast, gathering pace, then running, back towards

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the sea, “Roomijs, roomijs” still screeching out behind me. The sand felt heavy, clumpy, beneath my feet. I saw Ella clearly then, struggling in between the boat’s waves, but still no Dylan.

Aid was running into the sea.

“Ella!” I yelled, throwing my wallet down like a missile. “Where’s Dylan?” She couldn’t hear. Hurtling, the sand thrashed up against my calves. I untied my sarong, still running, and threw myself into the water, scanning the surface.

Ella, hair stuck to her face, looked back at me blankly, and then around; she didn’t know, she didn’t know he was under. Aid was swimming through the water far in front. I screamed for Dylan while paddling and fighting the waves—each seeming more powerful than the one before. The boat pulled away from the dock, its engine growling like an unseen monster. New waves slapped against me in its wake. My ears pounded, the tinnitus screeching, so alive.

Grappling with Ella, I managed to grab her arm and push her towards the shore. I paddled back around. The wave above me was gathering height, swelling, starting to break. I dived down, submerging myself, a weight of water crashing over me.

As I came back up, I saw him: Dylan, floating in the water next to the jetty. Bobbing. Limp.

“There!” I pointed, shouting at Aid, who was closer. He stared back at me, eyes frozen, like he’d seen a ghost. “Aid!” I screamed. But he was just floating, treading water, deadlocked. A look of dread I’d never seen before overtook his face.

I swam nearer, fighting the waves, being pulled and dragged around like seaweed. I tugged at Dylan, flipping him over, cupping his chin like I was sure you were supposed to, but the waves were so strong, sucking us up and down, just flotsam.

I managed to scoop him into my arms, cradling him, holding him like I had all those nights. He was spluttering, pale but breathing. Aid was next to me again, swimming with us now, guiding us all back to the shore. Another push and we were into the shallows, wading. Back into the calm. I dropped to the sand, still holding Dylan.

Aid prised him off me, laid him down. “Come on, dude.”

Dylan spluttered up saltwater, searching for breaths. Quick gasps.

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“He’s all right,” Aid reassured me. “He’s gonna be okay.” Aid kneeled next to me, blocking out the sun. A blur of tattoos.

The distant reggae gently thumped, the same song. The *same* song.

I hugged Dylan. “Are you okay?” He smiled, a little, and nodded. “You gave us such a fright.”

People were streaming towards us like bright confetti out onto the beach. Strangers’ hands stroking at my back, I flinched. Unknown voices: “That boat shouldn’t have been so close to the shore, not that fast.” The volume alternated in and out, ringing waves of tinnitus flooding over everything. A cloud of unbearable sound.

My hearing aids had drowned in the water. I pulled them from my ears, wondering if they were still working; I couldn’t tell. There were too many people. Too much noise. My muscles ached with exhaustion. Too much. Too much.

Too much.

I stumbled away from them, our little scene, back up the beach towards the towels, my ears screeching as I checked my aids which were somehow still working. The Dutch couple walked by in front of me, arm in arm, glancing down towards the sea. A few steps behind them the little blond girl followed, carrying a strawberry ice cream.