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04/18/2011

English Spoken

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An abstract of
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Abstract

English Spoken

By Sarah Wallace

A few months after a failed suicide attempt, college drop-out Leah Hollis travels to Costa Rica alone, claiming she wants an adventure. In reality, she plans to kill herself somewhere deep in the jungle, where no one will find her until its too late. As Leah discovers, hostels in Costa Rica all have signs which say “English Spoken,” but hardly anyone speaks English inside. Forced to use her limited Spanish, Leah finds a new way of communicating, not just with others, but also with herself. Speaking about secrets which she has long kept silent, first in Spanish, and then in English, Leah comes to understand the thoughts inside her head and how those thoughts, once spoken, compare with the truth.

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Chapter One

Now, granted, this was not the first time she had awoken in a strange bed, cold, and sore, and feeling like she had swallowed flaming cotton balls. In hindsight, though, Leah thought it was strange that, upon realizing her predicament, she didn't feel more alarmed. After all, this was the first time she had been tied to the bed she woke up in. Strapped, was probably a better word. Restrained. Not only were her hands bound to the metal handles of the slightly-reclined hospital bed, but there was also a thick, sticky substance on her chest. She looked down. A few inches below her collar bone, someone had smeared aloe onto her skin. They had smeared it all over the surface of two strange burns.

Well. This is a first.

And then she remembered.

There had been a chubby nurse. Heavy make-up, but pretty, with short grey hair. She looked like she might be angry. There was a lot of talking.

"How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"Blood Pressure is 100 over 70."

"Says she's allergic to Penicillin."

"EMS brought her in from Wellesley College. She resisted."

"Yeah, Jack got kicked in the nuts."

Leah was spitting blood into a bucket. "Been vomiting since we picked her up," the EMT told them. Some of her vomit was in his hair.

"She overdosed on aspirin."

For the love of God. "I did not overdose on aspirin! I told you." She had already clarified this in the ambulance, but they couldn't seem to get it right.

"You didn't try to kill yourself?" someone asked.

"Of course I tried to kill myself! But I didn't try to overdose on aspirin. That would be stupid. The aspirin was just

to make my blood thinner, so I'd bleed faster when I slit my wrists. Make sure that's in the chart."

Leah looked at the chubby nurse, who was nodding like she understood something. She still looked angry, but she wasn't angry with Leah. The doctor was angry with Leah.

He snapped, "Did you take anything else?"

"I drank some vodka."

"How much?"

She sighed, trying to sit up. "Honestly, I don't remember. But I'm sure it was enough for you to be concerned."

He stopped writing on his clipboard, put his hand on her skinny shoulder, and pushed her back into bed. He hadn't slept in a while, this doctor. There was coffee on his breath. He said, "I have a room full of people waiting to see me who are bleeding and vomiting and not because of something they did to themselves, so trust me when I tell you, I'm not concerned."

I'm not concerned.

Leah eyes glazed over. Her pupils dilated. She was gone. Back in her head. Back in that small house, miles from town. George was trying to take off her pants. *We can't do this*, she was telling him, but he wasn't listening. Her pants were too big,

and she had tied them up with a string from a bale of hay. George was fumbling with the string, but she'd tied it too tight. It couldn't be undone. *Your wife will be home any second.* She pushed him. He pulled a knife from his pocket, ran the blade up beside her stomach, so close to her skin. She didn't breathe until the string popped away. Her back stung when he pushed her up against the counter, his eyes glazed, his pupils dilated, his tone matching the doctor's: "I'm not concerned."

But the doctor looked concerned, now. Noises started leaking out of the machines they hooked her to. Her lungs wouldn't work any more. Her heart was beating too fast. This happened sometimes. Had happened since she was a child, when she was upset. She glanced down at her wrist. Pathetic thing. The blade had been too dull. It wasn't a deep enough cut. The doctor was talking again.

"Try to relax," he said. "Take some deep breaths. Do you have any history of heart problems?"

She could relax. She could let her heart slow down. But she didn't want to. She was aware, now, of the power she had over her own body. More aware than she had been even a few hours before, with a utility knife suspended above her wrist.

"Ma'am? Do you have any history of heart problems?"

Leah looked him dead in the eye and answered: "Yes."

And then she started to breath, hard and fast and shallow and faster. Her heartbeat climbed to 115, and then 120, 125...140...155...180. The doctor took her by the shoulders again. Said she'd put a lot of stress on her heart. 185...190...200. Hot blood pounded in her ears.

I'm not concerned.

The doctor called for a drug to be injected into her IV, but it didn't have the effect he intended. Leah was watching the monitor when she died. A surge of adrenaline. A little more pain. A moment of terrified regret. And then her head filled up with a long, piercing tone. When she heard it she thought, *Well, that's not good.* And, as she watched, the tone grew louder, and the jumping blue line fell flat.

She remembered all of this in the ICU, with her hands bound to the metal handles of the bed, and decided, *That explains the burns.* A glob of aloe dripped off the scalded skin and rolled coldly down her stomach. Later, when the drugs wore off, Leah would be angry. He had defibrillated her, that doctor. The fucker had brought her back.

Chapter Two

"You're not going to do this again, are you?" The chubby nurse from the ER had come to visit Leah in ICU. "I don't think you'll try to do this again. In fact..." she pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down a number. "You can reach me here at the hospital, and in a few months, or a year from now, you're going to call me and tell me that things are better. And that you're happy. And that you're so glad to be alive. You're going to tell me that you'll never do this again."

Leah cried. Not so much because she wanted to, but because it seemed like an appropriate response. In the aftermath of what she had not done, Leah had realized that all people were really looking for was an appropriate response.

Leah took the phone number, and the nurse took her hand. "When they brought you in," she said, "You were holding a letter." Leah gripped the side rails of the bed. The tears were now real. "I read it." She pulled the crumpled paper from her pocket and

put it in Leah's palm. Her fingers lingered, moving down to Leah's bandaged wrist. She said, "I have been where you are." Leah looked up. Lines, caked with foundation and powder, deepened around the nurse's concerned brown eyes. "It gets better."

Leah wanted to tell her that she was wrong, because it wouldn't get better, because she deserved all the hell the world had to offer, because no one should be able to forgive her for her for her sin. But she said nothing. She didn't know what she could say that was both true, and also an appropriate response. She was still searching for words, when the nurse hugged her lightly, then left.

"Will you be staying with your parents?" A few days later, the doctor was planning to release her.

"Nope. I spent seventeen years with my parents. That was enough." Leah forced a smile. "I'll be staying with friends."

The young man looked at her over his glasses, flipped through pages of notes. "You said you were glad you weren't successful? Glad to still be alive?"

"Oh, yes." Leah lied. "Very glad."

When the doctor left, Leah pulled the letter out and read it again. She thought of the nurse. The chicken-scratched phone number she had given her already looked faded, and uncertain. She hadn't written down her name, only the number, and Leah realized that she didn't remember the woman's name at all. Maybe she had told her and Leah forgot, or maybe she had just assumed Leah would look at her name tag, which she did remember had been pinned by the woman's stethoscope, to the pocket of her scrubs. Leah had some vague notion that it started with an R. Regina, maybe? Or Rachel? She didn't know. How could she call her if she didn't remember her name? She crumpled the note into a wad and dropped it in the trash. She couldn't call her. She never would.

Chapter Three

I don't want to be here anymore.

Leah Hollis was spitting blood into a bucket. She'd been out of the hospital a month. Her brother, Christopher, was in the other room, filling wet towels with ice to lay on her neck. Only he wasn't really her brother. He was really only a friend. She had met him and his wife, Misty - who wasn't really her sister-in-law - when she was sixteen. They were political activists in their thirties. Leah had worked with them during the Kerry campaign, when she was trying to find productive ways to channel her anger. She did data entry. She typed with purpose.

Leah lived with them now, in an ancient rented house off I-55. Her parents lived a couple hours north, in Artesia. Only they weren't really her parents, because Leah had stopped thinking of herself as anyone's daughter a long time ago.

Christopher was Leah's Emergency Contact. He had been the

first person to learn she tried to kill herself. Misty had been in the room when he got the call. She told Leah that when he answered the phone, his face crumpled. His features looked like they had been hit by a foul ball.

"Here." Christopher laid the towels on the back of Leah's neck gently, like her skin were made of eggshells. Her flesh was goose-pimpled and hot.

"Thanks," she said, and he took away her bucket. He was emptying it into the toilet, when she pushed him out of the way to spew up the sip of soda she'd been trying to keep down. She wrapped the towel tightly around her neck and pressed her cheek flat against the cold floor.

"When's your next doctor's appointment?" Christopher asked.

"Don't have one"

"Why not?"

"Because they said there's nothing they can do. The medicine should heal the ulcers. That will stop the blood." Leah had been vomiting almost every day. She was not bulimic. She just couldn't hold onto her food. The vomiting had started when she was a kid. Nervous stomach, the doctors said. The blood had started a few months ago, after she started downing her anti-depressants with tequila, and vodka, and gin.

"Don't you have nausea medicine?"

"Yep."

"Where is it?"

She motioned towards the plumbing. "It's run away to Vegas with my scrambled eggs."

"I think they should give you something stronger."

A disturbing smile broke across her face. She stopped it, for Christopher, out of pity. "Mmm... yeah. I don't think they should."

Three years before, Christopher and Misty Angler scooped Leah up the way they would have a scrappy dog. She often stayed in their house on weekends. They took her to rallies and committee meetings. Gave her dozens of books. Sent her back home to Artesia with bottles of water and plastic containers full of leftover food. She had been ravenous then. Hungry for everything.

Even when Leah was in the hospital, with tubes coming out of her nose and arms, Christopher didn't believe that Leah had wanted to die. The blade hadn't been dull; she just hadn't wanted to cut too deep. The EMS didn't stop her from finishing the job; she was stalling, giving them time to arrive. Christopher watched Leah absently rub her scarred wrist with her thumb. The harsh glare of the bathroom lights made her look translucent, like her insides were gone.

Leah rose to her knees on the cold grey tiles. Her shoulder blades sticking out through the back of her shirt, like towel hooks. Her joints, knobby and blue, knocked together as she grabbed onto the sink, and pulled herself up. As she turned on the water to wash her hands, a thin stream of blood began to run down her lip, from her nose.

"Oh, shit!" Christopher grabbed a handful of toilet paper from the roll. "Hold your head back."

"No. When I hold my head back it runs down my throat."

"Why is your nose bleeding?"

"Cold wind, dry heat. My nose always bleeds in the winter."

Leah wadded up the paper Chris handed her and fit it into her nose.

"Did you take something?"

"What? No. What the fuck would I take?"

"I meant, did you take something for your sinuses."

Leah paused. "Oh, no." *I didn't take aspirin, either. Or antifreeze. Or drano.*

"No need to get defensive."

"Sorry."

"Do you want a Sudafed?"

"No. Hurts my stomach." She pulled her bag of cosmetics out from under the counter. Uncapped a yellow stick of concealer to hide the blue bags.

"Going out today?" Christopher's cheeks rose up and crinkled his eyes. She had been spending so much time in bed. "You want to go shopping? There's a sale at the bookstore. Or maybe you could use some shoes!"

"No thanks."

"You know you don't have any cute shoes." Christopher had taken on an effeminate caricature, to make her laugh. "That would make *anybody* sad. Walking around all day in *your* shoes."

"I have an interview."

"Oh." Christopher put his hands in his pockets. "I don't see how you think you can work." Leah had applied for a job as a waitress at "Collusion," one of the few fancy restaurants in town.

"If I'm well enough to go shopping, I'm well enough to work." *Besides, I'm not going to be around long enough to need new shoes.*

"Not true. You don't have to work yet. Misty and I can pay your bills."

"No! Thank you, but it's bad enough you let me live here."

"Bad enough?" Christopher sucked in his cheeks.

"I just mean you're doing too much. I waited tables for a year before Wellesley. There's no need for me not to wait tables now."

"You hated waiting tables and, as I recall, you weren't very good at it."

"I did hate waiting tables, but I was good at it."

"I, on the other hand, loved waiting tables!"

"For the love of God."

Christopher's face had fleshed back out. His voice dropped into the timbre he used for long stories and political speeches. Tiny creases peaked in at the edges of his eyes. "Now, I wasn't the best server, by any means. I forgot orders, or put them in wrong, or spilled some drinks, now and then. But..." Leah pushed past him and tried to walk to her bedroom, but Christopher blocked her path. He continued, undeterred. "People just really seemed to appreciate me. I don't think there was a single night that I didn't make at least 20%. And if I had a banquet? Woo! I could rack up at a banquet. You know, many people don't know how to work a banquet effectively, but I learned very quickly. Let me tell you what I did."

Leah escaped, but with Christopher right behind her. She took a pillow from the bed and tried to hit him with it, but he caught it in his hands. They struggled over it. "You know, I

seem to remember you didn't make those kinds of tips. Let's see, I averaged 22%... what did you average?"

"Fuck you!" She was smiling.

"I believe you made around 11%, isn't that right?"

She still hadn't reclaimed the pillow, but she was trying vigorously. "I made 14%, and I was a great server. I didn't forget orders, or put them in wrong, or spill things - "

"So you're saying they just didn't like you. Did you smell?"

"You were working in casinos! I was working at *The Hollow Leg!* Besides, people tip men more than women."

"Excuses, excuses."

"And of course you enjoyed it - you didn't have to deal with sexual harassment."

"I absolutely did have to deal with it. I enjoyed it immensely."

"What did you enjoy?" Misty was back from the store, a bag of groceries in each hand.

"Misty, have I ever told you about how much I enjoyed waiting tables at the Beau Rivage?"

"Oh, Lord." She rolled her eyes and turned towards the kitchen. Leah grabbed the pillow and raised it above Christopher's head.

"Don't leave, Misty! Leah's trying to beat me!"

"Good! Let me set these down, and then I'll come back and help her."

Chapter Four

01/17/2006

Nothing makes you want to kill yourself like a failed suicide attempt.

Leah was trying to write in her journal. She had been trying to write in this journal since she attempted suicide, seven weeks ago. She'd been hoping to write something meaningful about the experience.

01/18/2006

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.....

Fuck.

Leah was frustrated.

The journal was a gift from Christopher, given to her the week before she left for Wellesley. He was trying to encourage her

future as a writer. Leah had loved the gift at first - admiring its cotton pages and leather binding - but now the sight of it put a lump in her throat. It was a symbol of Christopher's mislaid confidence in her. Sheets of insecurities, wrapped in dead flesh. Dozens of pages were ripped out of the front. Leah had filled those pages during the weeks she spent at Wellesley. On the night she tried to kill herself, she tore them out and threw them away, so that no one would read ever them after her death. The tearing left holes in the binding. Whenever she opened the book, the blank leaves tried to jump out.

She looked down at the scar on her wrist. It was such a pathetic little thing. It might not have scarred at all, except that when she was in the hospital, she refused to have stitches. The proof stood on her arm now, purple and raised. She liked touching it, holding her wrist in the palm of her hand and rubbing the scar with the thumb. What would George think of her, if he saw this scar? She knew what he would think. He would think it would have been better if she'd slashed her femoral instead.

Putting her pen to the paper, Leah wrote the only words which floated coherently through her mind:

It hurts.

Which probably summed it up as well as anything else.

If she could have forced more of that sentiment through her dumb pen, she would have described having something in her chest that she couldn't release. A balloon, stuck behind her ribs that picked the most inconvenient times to fill itself up with hurt. The burning tightness pushed on her from the inside, and she clutched a pillow on her bed to try to stop the pain. She knew one day it was going to crack apart her chest and leave her open, the pillow still clutched in her hands. She thought about the thousands of brown locusts that came to the farm every seven years when she was a kid. She would find them in her room, in the trees outside her window, in the barn loft, clutching the hay with their tiny legs. She would find them empty, a split straight down their axis and only a musty sweetness inside.

Leah went to the living room and took a long look out the front door. Christopher and Misty were both at work. Underneath her bed she had hidden a bottle of vodka. Today, she would finish it. She poured a glass and added just enough juice to cover the smell of the alcohol. **Alcohol kills brain cells**, she

remembered reading. *So does depression*, she countered. *I'm just choosing how they die.*

At the bottom of her dresser drawer, Leah kept a cedar box. It had a lock on it that was broken. Leah didn't worry. Neither Christopher nor Misty would violate her privacy by looking inside. There were letters there. Written but never sent. Letters of apology to Melissa, for having an affair with her husband. Love letters to George. The letter the nurse had returned to Leah in the hospital. It was from Melissa. It said that she knew. There were pictures too. Most of them taken of George's back, when he wasn't looking. He hated people pointing cameras at his face. It had been three months since Leah had last seen him, in that hotel room in Louisville. How long would it take for her to start forgetting what he looked like? How long before her mind betrayed her, and the image of his face started slipping away?

Leah spent seven years at that ranch, working for George. She started when she was only twelve years old. She'd been home schooled since kindergarten. Her studies were easy, so she had extra time. She needed to save for college. More importantly, she needed to get out of her house. So, every afternoon, she would groom horses, stack feed sacks, and haul horse shit from the stables until dark. The work was hard, especially in the

heat. Sometimes, Leah would pass out from the sun and lie in the dirt where she fell, until someone found her and put water on her face. She tore muscles from the strain of moving eighty pound bales of hay. Her heart beat so hard, she could hear it in her ears. She imagined it leaving invisible bruises underneath her skin.

Leah was the only girl on the farm. "A good hand," George had called her. "Cheap labor," Christopher said, pointing out that Leah made less than the Mexicans who brought in the hay. She took a second job, waiting tables, at seventeen. Her paychecks from George arrived sporadically, and were always short. But every night, before Leah left the farm and head down the gravel road home, George would give her a hug. A long hug. He would pull her in close to him in the side of hallway of the barn and press his nose to her hair. "Thank you for all your help," he would tell her. Every day, he hugged her like this, letting her melt into the cool sweat of his chest. Leah remembered a homeless hippy she had once seen on the side of the road. He held up a cardboard sign which said, "Will Work for Love."

Pathetic, she thought, and finished the vodka in her cup.

Chapter Five

I've got to get the fuck out of Jackson.

From the day she moved into Chris and Misty's tiny house, Leah knew it could only be temporary. For one thing, she hated the Capital. Small and backward and hot and dirty. Every street was filled with pot holes. Every small green park filled with trash and littered with homeless people who hid on park benches under blankets, even during the middle of the day.

There were no good neighborhoods in Jackson, Leah decided. Christopher said she was wrong. "What about Belhaven?" he said. There were some pretty houses in Belhaven. Large, colonial style homes which sat far back from the road, with security system advisories staked outside their door on blue shields. Their front yards held political campaign signs claiming endorsements from Jesus. Leah didn't like that neighborhood any more than she liked the one a few blocks south of Christopher's rental. Rows of shack houses squatted there, leaning in around the large

families inside. Children and old people. Bright and jaundiced. Their eyes stared suspiciously from their windows when Leah drove to work. Jackson. The entire city smelled like disappointment and shit.

Leah wanted to fly away from Jackson. Truth be told, she wanted to fly away from Christopher and Misty, too. It wasn't that either of them had made her feel unwanted. She looked around the house. Traces of her were everywhere, from her cosmetics on the bathroom counter, to the bland food Misty kept for her nervous stomach, in the fridge, to the ribbons and plaques Chris hung, all crooked, in his study - prizes which she won in horse shows, many before they had even met. Everywhere she looked, Leah was smothered by their sacrifice. Smothered and shamed. They had rearranged every part of their lives to try to make her feel welcome. It wasn't working.

Inside Leah's head, an intangible clock was ticking down. Eventually, Christopher and Misty would realize that their little pet project was just a really lost cause. They would either come to this conclusion on their own and kick her out, or find the proof swinging from the end of a rope. *The first one would be more painful.* Leah had been waiting tables at "Collusion," but she continued letting Christopher and Misty pay all the rent and buy all the groceries. It only compounded her

guilt, but she needed to save. She had to have money to leave. She just didn't know where she was going to go.

She thought of her parents. Not that staying with them was ever an option. Besides, there was no room for her there now. Bobby and Jean Hollis had lost the house. They lived in an RV, propped up on concrete blocks out by a pond. A new family lived in their big house on the hill. So, Leah would never see her old bedroom again. She was glad. There had been too much to hear in that house. Slamming doors and breaking glass.

Sometimes the sounds would rise up in her head, usually at night. She heard yelling, mostly. A ringing behind her ears - like the noise that's left over after you leave a cocktail party. Most of it, she couldn't understand. Black noise. But some snippets of conversation she could make out. They were like captions to the flashbulb memories behind her eyes. *Leah crying at the dinner table. Bobby screaming: "You think I care if you cry? You can cry until your eyes fall out. I'm still leaving."* He stayed. Usually, she could only remember these flashbulbs - not what led up to them, or what happened afterwards. They stuck out in her mind like beads on an invisible string.

Another one: *Leah sitting outside her mother's bedroom door.* This memory was vague, not specific, because it happened many

times. Leah was sitting outside her mother's bedroom, her legs prickling against the cold floor. The door was cold too, against her ear. She was listening for her mother's breath, but the roar from the air conditioner was drowning it out. Jean had left it set on 68 again. She was going through the change of life, and was always hot. Leah was always cold. Jean had taken some pills. Phenergan. Or maybe some Percoset. Whatever was left over from someone's last medical procedure. Or if she had nothing else, a handful of Tylenol PM. She didn't drink alcohol, though. Drinking alcohol was a sin. And then came the caption: "*Y'all are going to find me dead one day, and you're gonna know it's all you're fault.*" So, Leah was sitting on the hardwood floor, listening for her mother's breath.

I've got to get the fuck out of Jackson.

Leah wasn't going to make it much longer. Her muscles ached. Her feet cramped inside her shoes. She had worked eight hours for 12 dollars in tips. *I should have insisted Lionel put an 18% on that table.* But she hadn't. Lionel was her manager. He forgot to add gratuity to the check, like Leah had asked. Her patrons were ready to go, so Leah gave those 19 old broads of the Red Hat Society the benefit of the doubt, trusting them to leave her

a decent tip. *I even wore the fucking boa.* It was fuchsia and kept dripping feathers, and was given to her by the really old one in the wheelchair. She wore it while serving them martinis, and tatakis, and wontons, and duck confit with black rice, and a whole table full of molten chocolate cakes. Almost \$500 dollars worth of food and drinks. After taking up her entire section for four hours, they were suddenly in a hurry to leave. And they wanted separate checks. Leah silently stabbed her leg with a pen said, "Sure." And then they stiffed her. Well, seventeen of them had stiffed her. Two of them had left her a grand total of twelve dollars. And after they all ducked out, she spent an hour pulling shiny shards of paper out of the carpet because, apparently, it just wasn't a party without confetti.

The needle resting on the flashing gas tank alerted Leah that her car was running on empty. Standing at the Shell Station beside an underpass, Leah hadn't even put ten dollars in the tank when before she saw a scruffy stranger heading in her direction. He looked nervous. The red windbreaker he wore cast a faint orange glow against his dark cheeks. Leah put away the gas nozzle and tried to make it around to the driver's side door, but he beat her there.

"Get in the car." The man pulled a knife from his pocket and held it out in the air. His elbow was straight. The blade stood out only three inches from the plastic handle.

Leah's chest was pounding. "Get in the car." The big man in front of her licked his lips. His arms were three times the size of hers. *"It's not the size of him that counts."* She could hear George's voice in her head. The words he told her in the barn, at the ranch. Every day for a whole summer, he had taught her self-defense. Knives, and weapons, and close combat. Things he had learned during the first Iraq War. The man in front of her had cold eyes. Leah moved her gaze, fixed it on the point of the knife at the end of the man's arm. His elbow was straight. There was George's voice again: *"This one here don't really know how to use a blade."*

"Get in the car."

Leah had once told her father how she was learning self-defense. "You're just kidding yourself," he said. "A woman can't win a fight with no man." Leah imagined the blade around her neck, her pants being jerked down past her knees, her hips pressed hard against the hood of her car, somewhere off the highway, in the woods. She wondered how much it would hurt. She saw her body wrapped in plastic, yellow tape sealing her off

from the living world, and she felt relieved. Peace would be worth the pain. But what if he left her alive? Beaten, and raped, but *alive*? Leah felt a stream of urine flowing warm down her leg. Her arms were heavy and cold.

"No." She slipped her hand inside her purse.

"Get in the car."

"No." Her fingers reached in the inside pocket, found something cold and hard.

"Bitch, I said get in the car." He moved forward half a step.

Leah pulled out her own knife and flipped it open. "How much do you want this?" George was whispering in her head: "*If he moves forward, block with your left and cut the carotid.*" Or she could freeze. Keep her left arm down. Hope his blade sank deep enough into her skin.

"What?" Her would-be assailant was visibly confused. He looked from her knife and back to his. Hers was bigger. "What the fuck are you doing? Get in the fucking car. You trying to get cut?"

Yeah, Leah thought. *I am trying to get cut.* She moved forward. "I'm having a bad time," she said. Her voice was hoarse. "I had an affair with my old boss. She found out." Telling him this, under the lurid glow of the Shell Station lights, Leah felt like

she was giving confession. "She wrote me a letter, telling me how horrible I am. Even though, by the time she found out, George wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot-pole."

The man shook his head, "Lady? What the hell?"

Leah could feel tears on her face. "I've got heartburn, and a headache, and I worked all day long for nothing. I've only got twelve dollars in my purse and I'm ready to get my throat slit over that. Really ready. So, I ask you again: How much do you want this?"

The stranger's mouth hung lax. He lowered his arm. "Oh, Come on!" Leah prodded. Her voice harsh with disappointment and rage.

He was dumbfounded. "Bitch," he said, "you are crazy!" And then he spit on the ground, and he moved away.

Chapter Six

I'm going to Costa Rica.

The thought came to her as she was standing in a Barnes & Nobles bookstore, in the travel section. Christopher had dragged her along for the semi-annual sale. The Lonely Planet's Guide to Costa Rica caught her eye on the wooden shelf.

Leah's nerve endings were buzzing since her encounter with the would-be kidnapper, a couple of days before. She hadn't been ready to die when she cut her wrist, at Wellesley. She had been ready to die two nights ago. She could do it now. She could follow through. Just knowing that her days were numbered had made the past few hours easier to bear. But she couldn't kill herself in Jackson. Even if she did it away from the house, so

someone else would find her body, she couldn't put Christopher through that again.

Costa Rica. There was a monkey on the cover of the guidebook, and Leah liked monkeys. That seemed like a good enough reason to go, right there. She would like to see some monkeys before she died.

"It's the safest country in Central America," she pitched the idea to Christopher and Misty later that night. "They abolished their military in 1948, so there's no chance of a coup." Christopher was clenching his dinner fork. Misty looked away from the table, drinking her beer. "I could learn Spanish. You know I've always wanted to learn Spanish. But it's so hard to do in a classroom. A person needs to be immersed."

Christopher cleared his throat. "You seem.. excited."

"And you always said I should travel."

"Seems like a pretty sudden decision," said Misty. And then, "What do you want to do there?"

Die. "Just backpack. See the sights. Stay in hostels. Learn the language. Hike. I need some time to figure things out before I go back to school."

Christopher brightened. "So you are going back to school."

"Of course." Leah's voice cracked. She took a sip of water and worked hard to swallow. "I'll reapply. Just as soon as I come back."

"How can you pay for the trip?"

"Their currency is devalued, compared to ours. I'll live cheap. I have enough money saved to stay for the summer. Maybe even another couple of months after that."

Misty was crying. She wiped her tears away with her napkin. Christopher pushed the food around on his plate. "I wish you'd stay with us, here, for a while."

Christopher had no power to keep her. Leah was nineteen. But she wanted to hear him say that it was ok. "I love you both," she said. "But it's time for me to go. I want to... I want to see things I haven't seen. I want to have some fun. I've got to get out of Mississippi."

He nodded.

She wondered if he knew she wasn't coming back.

Chapter Seven

"You are lucky," Napo said, the creases around his smiling eyes making Leah doubt his sarcasm. Blood dripped down from a small cut on her bare arm. *I shouldn't have worn short sleeves.* Her horse, Mae, hadn't appreciated Napo's choice of trail, or lack thereof. Feeling he'd had more than his fair share of vines and branches scratched across his face, Mae stepped off the trail and wiggled his rider through the brush. A long, thin, razor sharp leaf pulled across Leah's skin, cutting her like a knife. The wound burned cold.

"You are lucky," Napo was saying. "You've been cut by a plant with healing properties." He gave her a moment to appreciate the statement, though, seemingly oblivious to the irony.

"Oh, good." She wiped the blood off her arm, and then used Mae's mane to wipe the blood off her hand. *Not good.* Instantly, a swarm of gnats appeared, eager to gnaw up the scattered cells of her *sangre*. They floated like a cloud in front of her face.

Napo pointed to another bush. Not as shiny as Leah's attacker-plant, with broader leaves. It's edges seemed dull, but looking at the spines standing up on its fronds made her sliced arm burn colder. "That one causes... *cómo se dice*..." He mumbled something in spanish. "Putrification!" His ancient eyelids pulled open a little bit with pride over this recovered term. Leah stared at him blankly. "Maybe this isn't the word... Necrosis?"

"Necrosis?"

"You know this word? Yes, this is the word. That one causes Necrosis. Very bad. What's another word for this? Burning? Causes burns?"

"I don't know. Caustic, maybe?"

"Caustic? What is this? Caustic?"

"Umm...it means it burns. Chemical burn."

Napo was thrilled. "Ah, yes! A chemical burn. That's right. This plant - " he pointed to another bush, less menacing in appearance. "This plant has a chemical, causes caustic." Riding in front of Leah and Mae, Napo looked like a metronome. He swung his arm back and forth in wide motions, from the spiny plant on his left, all the way to the latest would-be assassin across the trail. "Necrosis. Caustic."

Leah nodded and tried to match Napo's smile. "Those are good words, huh?" He said, searching for kudos.

"Yup. Good words."

"I always like to remember good words." Leah noticed how Napo said he liked to "remember" good words and not learn them. Napo was too old to learn. "My English is very good." He stated, proud, waiting for her to confirm.

"Oh, yes." In fact, his English was very good. Surprisingly good for someone living in this little beach town, which saw less tourism than other *playas* in the country. Leah had arrived at Playa Samara a couple of days before. She was expecting sun and surf, and jungle. She imagined brightly colored beach shacks selling piña coladas, and woodworks, and sarongs. Samara wasn't that kind of beach. *You've got to be kidding me.* Leah's stomach sunk with her backpack as she let it drop to the ground. This place looked like it would have been a fine candidate for humanitarian aid. The image she had cultivated of sinking away into a remote paradise for the last days of her life splattered like a rotten fruit against the grimy poverty of her surroundings. *Fuck it,* she decided. *I'll just go ahead and die.*

If compared only to tropical places where no civil unrest or natural disaster had recently occurred, Samara was the gloomiest place on earth. This would have been a quiet beach, even during

the high season. During the rainy season, which arrived only a few weeks before, it was practically deserted. Thick clouds rose above the humidity to block out the sun. The only points of light on the shore were a honeymooning white couple walking along the surf. They kept ample distance between their feet and the water, which was freezing cold. In Leah's guidebook, the volcanic sand was touted as, "crushed minerals and shells with shimmering obsidian stones, glowing like black jewels in the daytime light." It looked like ash. Ashy ash. *Forget slathering on coconut oil and lounging with a book.* There wasn't enough light on this beach to read. Condensation rose up from off the leaves around her and hung heavy at her throat. She could feel beads of sweat sitting defiantly between her shoulder blades, refusing to roll.

Leah walked around the potholed pavements and gravel roads of Samara for a couple of hours before choosing a hostel. "Brisas del Mar" was just outside town, nestled into the side of a very steep hill. Leah decided halfway up this hill that the hostel would be her final destination, even before she saw the grounds. Her backpack straps were cutting deep ruts into her skeletal shoulders, and a pack of tanned, shirtless men had left their construction site to follow her up the street. One lanky, young rascal was bold enough to try to lift up the gauzy pink skirt

she wore, and he laughed at the light that bounced back off her pale legs. Leah's cheeks burned. Her lips were tight.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, Leah leaned forward against the weight of her pack as she marched. Her foot slipped off a loose rock, and the stone flipped up above her shoe, scraping her ankle. "Owww." She tripped, falling on her left knee. One of the men tried to help her up, but she blocked his hand, hitting his arm at the elbow and knocking him off balance. "Get away from me. Don't touch me. *No me toques!*" She grabbed hold of the rocky hillside on her left and pulled herself up. Angry tears wet her face as blood seeped into the mangled skirt around her knee. Dropping her pack to the ground, Leah turned to face them. Her knees were bent, her shoulders forward. She looked like a banty rooster at a fight yard. Looking at her hand, she realized she was gripping a large stick. She must have picked it up from the ground. "*Véte!*" She screamed at them. It felt good to scream in Spanish. More powerful, somehow. "*Véte!*" She tried again, focusing on her accent. Even over the roar of the blood pumping in her head, she thought she sounded pretty good. She tried something a little fancy, "*Váyase a la chingada.*" Fuck off.

Leah was expecting to get her ass kicked. Even if these ruffians were planning to let her go unscathed before, surely picking up a stick and screaming at them to fuck off in Spanish

would be an unforgivable assault to their *machismo*. She locked eyes with the man in front of her. A scraggly beard held on for life to the sides of his craggy cheeks, like lichens on a rock. There was golden symbol on his hard hat. He was the foreman. Leah braced herself for an attack. She was unprepared for his laughter. First the foreman, then the rest of them. Slapping each other on the backs, wiping their eyes with their dirty hands, imitating her gringo accent. "Váyase! Vàyase a la chingada!" She tightened her grip on the stick, and the rotten wood crumbled in her puny fist. Even the birds were mocking her. Leah was quiet. She crossed her arms over her chest and bore her stare into the foreman's eyes. She must have looked at him the way his mother used to, when he was a boy. The effect was instant shame. "Heygh!" The foreman threw a sharp noise from the back of his throat and stepped forward at the other men. Silence. "*Disculpenos.*" He lowered his head with the apology, then looked shyly in her eyes and said it again, "*Disculpenos.*"

Leah nodded. "Go." She wiped beneath her eye, then dismissively tossed her hand. "Go away." They retreated down the hill, pushing each other lightly, walking almost horizontally on the steep incline, like it took no effort at all. A few laughs rose up from beneath the hard hats when they were far enough away.

The entrance to "Brisas del Mar" was hidden in undergrowth near the top off the hill, not far from where Leah had fallen. Once she passed through the gate, she was relieved to see the dark wooden fixtures of the communal patio. Modest landscaping hedged a row of hammocks, and the shaggy tropical leaves shielded them from the vacationing sun. Standing on the road, the placed seemed empty; but Leah could hear a pool filter running, circulating water in a *piscina* only slightly larger than something she might have inflated back in the States.

Across from the patio, there was a small building, made from the same darkly-stained wood. A sign leaned against the window-sill, plastic and official-looking. "English Spoken," it promised. Leah was relieved. The small bits of Spanish she had picked up from her high school curriculum were barely enough to get her by, so far. Leah had packed light for this trip. Her backpack contained the following: a few changes of versatile clothing; a hundred dollars worth of disposable cameras (she didn't have a digital camera, and she didn't want to worry about being robbed); a ziplock bag full of matches, a reflective blanket, and some other emergency supplies; thick hiking boots; her journal from Christopher; and an old Spanish textbook which weighed more than all her other belongings combined.

Leah had been going over vocabulary words in her spare time, leading up to this trip. Conjugating verbs at work when she didn't have too many tables. Memorizing simple sentences. But she was 11 hours into her journey, now, and her skills weren't serving her well, so far. Converting dollars into the local currency of *colones* was just as difficult as trying to translate into Spanish the scattered bits of English inside her head. Forget trying to understand what the *Ticos* were saying. The heavily accented sounds escaped too quickly from her ears to be transported to her brain.

"Hello?" She called. "Anybody here? *Soy... turista. Halo?*"

"*Voy!*" A woman's voice came from somewhere beyond the patio roof. A few minutes later, the soft slap of flip-flops against wet leaves preceded the arrival of a pretty 30-something in bright white shorts. Her coffee-colored hair was piled on top her head with a scrunchie. Sweat marked the orange halter top which dropped low beneath her neck. "*Estaba trabajando,*" she explained.

"Trabajando?"

"*Sí. Limpiando el canalón.*"

"Ahh, ok." Leah had no idea what the woman said she was cleaning. She was staring at Leah with a wide, almost rabbit-

like smile, her front teeth straight, but large. Pointing to the sign in the window, Leah asked, embarrassed: "Um... *Habla ingles?*"

The woman's smile stayed steady as her eyes widened, and she nodded, once: "Sí." But she made no attempt to speak English.

Deep inside her head, Leah's mirror neurons were firing in bursts, working to make her face match the expression of the woman in front of her, until both women smiled goofily at each other. Leah's cheeks started to crack and she laughed. "Aha. So, *habla ingles?*"

"Sí!" The woman laughed again until Leah's smile lost out to her frustration. "A little," the woman said. "I speak English, a little. I understand better than I speak. My name is Liz."

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"I speak English better than anyone in Samara," Napo had a machete. He was hacking away at the "trail" in front of them. "I learned when I was thirty years old."

"There's still hope for me then," Leah smiled lamely. Her focus was on Mae, and his sly attempts to ram her knee into the spiny surface of the *Pochote* tree they were passing.

"Pshaa... You are a baby. You know nothing."

Leah tried to take this as a compliment.

"You'll have plenty of time to practice Spanish in Costa Rica. But not with me. With me we speak English."

"How did you learn English?"

"When I was thirty."

"No. *How* did you learn?" She could tell Napo understood the question, but he still looked confused.

"I just," he waved his hand in front of him and pinched something invisible in the air. Like he'd pinched the petal of a tree blossom he caught flying in the wind. "Picked it up."

Napo didn't live in the Samara, proper. He lived in a little house in the mountains, several miles from town. Leah had met Napo on the beach the day before. He was moving some horses from one pasture to another, on foot, across the sand. He was struggling with one grey mare, who darted away from him several times and cut back through the surf. The horse trotted close to her, and Leah threw up her hands, moving the mare back to the rest of the herd. "*Quieres ayuda?*" She offered. "*Trabajè con caballos.*" And then, in case he didn't understand: "I used to work with horses." Napo kept walking, but hearing her offer to help, he looked back over his shoulder and motioned for her to follow him. "Watch the gray one," he warned when Leah approached. "She kicks."

There was a spectral quality about this man, because although he was very old, his movements were relatively agile. *Compared to me, anyone is agile*, Leah thought. She hadn't exercised in months. Her lungs felt small and her heart beat a hard, irregular rhythm as she fought her way through the thick, black sand. *He's got to be at least 75*. Napo's skin was impressively wrinkled, and it looked paper thin. He wore his shirt unbuttoned. Age had curled his body into the shape of a C. One hand was so gnarled with arthritis, Leah wondered if it had locked in place. Napo had thin hair and missing teeth, but he was able to hop over a fallen log which Leah could barely climb. *I wonder if he does Yoga.*

They moved in silence off the end of the beach, where the sand turned into rock. At the base of the hill, between two giant Ficus trees, Napo unwound a piece of twine and opened a gate. The horses trotted in happily, even the grey mare who had tried to escape acted as if this had been her final destination all along. "Thank you for your help," Napo said, extending his hand.

"You're welcome."

"Are you here with family?"

"No, I'm traveling by myself."

"Would you like to have breakfast with me? I'll buy it in the town."

Leah hesitated. Despite Napo's age, Leah was worried he might have other ideas about this breakfast. *At his age, he shouldn't.* But Leah had learned you could never really tell for sure.

"Where are you staying?" Napo asked, responding to her silence.

"Brisas del Mar."

"Ahh, yes. We'll go there. Liz will make us something to eat."

"You know Liz?"

"Yes, she's a good woman. Very good. Robi too, her husband. Good people. They know me."

"Great."

"We'll eat there."

"Ok."

"Ah, Leah! *Ahora estás.*" Robi stepped outside the kitchen which connected to the patio. He held two plates of pineapple, tortillas and *gallo pinto* - black beans and rice. "We were wondering this morning: where is our friend?"

"I went for a walk."

"Ah," he set the plates on the table. "Your breakfast is included." Then, to the old man at her side, "*Buenas, Napo? Que tal?*"

Liz gave him an exuberant hug. "*Napo, mi amor! Còmo estàs?*" Then, in hesitant English. "When Robi and I came here, to Samara, Napo was our first friend." Napo was nodding, helping himself to thick slices of pineapple. "We went with Napo to the mountains," Liz told Leah, pointing to the tree covered peaks behind them. "To see the waterfall."

"The waterfall?" Leah began leafing through her guidebook. "Which waterfall?"

"It's not in there," Napo shook his head. "This waterfall isn't in any book. It's up in the mountains. You can only get to it after several hours on horses. You have to cross over the property of a very old man, and then you hike up through a river, to the waterfall."

"Nice."

"Only ten white people have ever seen it." He paused, finishing his pineapple, sizing Leah up with a critical eye. Finally, he shrugged, "I can take you if you like."

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Leah was back in her head.

Lathered, foamy sweat flew back and landed on her face, flicked up from the reins on Apache's neck. She turned her head to the side and spit, but she couldn't get rid of the taste. Horsehair and salt. Summer was coming. By the time Leah turned 18 in July, it would be too hot to ride so hard. Apache needed the conditioning now if he was going to be competitive in the endurance races that fall. She wouldn't be riding him in those competitions. Leah would be at college, at Wellesley. George's wife, Melissa, would ride. Leah imagined Melissa in the saddle, posting alongside George for fifty miles of trail. Crossing the finish line together, exhausted, before dark. She imagined George helping Melissa down from the saddle, her hips steadied by his hands. Leah tightened the reins and brought Apache to a walk.

"Need a break?" George trotted up beside her.

"I think we should switch horses." Leah glanced over at George's big bey. "Apache's beating me to death." She poured water on her palm, pressing the wetness to the back of her neck. "I'm feeling every hoof beat in my skull."

"Not sure that's a good idea." George was concerned about her handling a stallion. "We've been breeding him a lot." Samson was harder to handle when he'd been breeding. He danced ahead of the bit, his neck bowed.

"How many miles left?"

"About eight."

Leah shook her head. They'd ridden thirteen miles that morning. She couldn't handle another eight. Spots of white were widening in her field of vision. Her feet went cold and tingly inside her boots. "Need to rest."

They stopped beside a creek. George held Leah's hair back as she vomited into the dead leaves on the ground. "You got too hot."

"Sorry." Leah wiped her face. She rinsed her mouth out with the running water, embarrassed.

"Hey," George pulled her against him, held her head to his chest. "I got to take care of my girl."

Chapter Ten

Her room at "Casa Verde Mar" was tiny. Barely wider than the width of her twin bed, and only twice as long. There was no exhaust vent in the bathroom, and no window in the room. The air inside felt cold and wet, like a cave. Leah smiled to herself. A cave. That seemed fitting.

She had found a cave at Wellesley, too, in the woods behind her dorm. A mostly round edifice twice the size of her tiny dorm room, on the backside of a rocky hill. She liked to think she was the only person who knew about it. It was deep in the Wellesley woods, at least a quarter of a mile from the jogging path. The cave became her hiding place during her one semester there.

The walls were so thin at Wellesley, and the rooms so small. Any noise she made shot out from her like the spray from a pellet gun. Cold and sharp fragments of sound that passed through the walls. Normally, the afternoons were a good time to

cry. The nice weather drew people outside, and Leah had been taking advantage of her empty dorm room during those hours, seizing the opportunity to lie face down on her bed and bawl. That day, though, the day she went inside the cave, her neighbor, Ji Ling, was in the room next to hers, having sex with a boyfriend from Harvard. The sex didn't really distract Leah. If anything, the sounds Ji Ling was making only fueled her ability to cry. As it turns out, though, her crying didn't do much for Ji Ling's libido; and, after she knocked on her door to complain about the noise Leah was making, they both decided they needed to find somewhere else to scream.

Leah had already gotten in trouble for crying on campus. Two days after orientation, the pressure inside her chest forced her out of her room. An hour later, someone heard her outside, below her window, in the dark. She was sitting under the branches of a Cedar Tree, hiccuping and empty, when the cop shone a light into her face. "You're scaring people," he said. And he made her go inside. She remembered this when she entered the cave the first time. She sat on the cold floor and pressed her bare hands to the stone, but she didn't scream the way she wanted. She took off her scarf and wadded it into a ball. She pushed it into her mouth and breathed into it, hard, letting out only a little sound at a time. Leah had done this before, often, as a child.

Sitting on the carpet with her back against the bed, slouched down so that, if someone came into her room, no one would be able to see. No one could see her in the cave, either. There was nobody around. Her head was aching when she pulled the scarf away, not to scream, but to listen. Over the hills, a dog was howling. A stray dog, or lost, or not-lost, but stuck in some chain-link fence, or tied to tree. Whatever his circumstance, Leah knew what he meant. She recognized the grief in that howl.

That dog could get away with its crying, because it was a dog. He could sit on his haunches, or pace back and forth at the fence, or strain against his collar and bellow out his lungs, waiting for someone to answer. Waiting for someone to make him stop. And someone must have, because after a few minutes, she heard no more howls. It hurt her, his stopping. Because as long as he was crying, she felt like she didn't have to. And with the returning silence, the air got too heavy, and she was getting crushed underneath the absence of sound. Leah scooted to the mouth of the cave, so that her noise wouldn't get caught in the rock. She wanted it to go forward, straight out, over the hills to that dog. *Aawoooooo! Aawoooo!* She howled into the air, her legs crossed underneath her, her hands in her lap, too white in the cold, the scarf still bunched between them. *Aawooooo!* Her head thrown back so that she felt the sinews pull tight at the

front of her throat. *Aawoooooo!* And she heard a noise returning, lower and fuller than her own. He heard her, too.

They sat there, each in their respective places, answering each other. She left after the sun went down. When the dog stopped calling back to her over the hills. When the woods no longer rang with the mourning in his song. When someone besides Leah heard him crying, and, she hoped, let him inside.

Back in her room in Verde Mar, Leah took out her journal and began to write:

I should have done it there. Not that day, but later. I should have swallowed the vodka, and swallowed the pills, and packed a bag with the utility knife, and my ipod, and my pillow. And my organ donor card, in case, when the search group came, some part of my body was still alive enough to use.

She thought about it often, at Wellesley. About suicide. She had it all planned out. A last resort, in case it got too hard to breath, or to keep quiet. Then one day, she saw an email from Melissa in her inbox, telling her the secret was out. She knew what she had done, and she hoped she would rot in Hell.

"It's not true!" Leah was crying into the phone, lying to Melissa. Her only chance to make things right.

"Melissa," Leah wished she'd taken more time before calling to formulate a lie. "I've been at your house, at the ranch, almost every day since I was a little girl. I practically grew up in your yard. George is like..." she faltered. "George is like family to me. You both are."

Melissa was quiet. She wanted to believe. "Well... I don't want you to talk to George about this. I don't want you to let him know I called. We're all just going to move on."

"Ok."

"Whatever was going on between you and my husband, whether just friendly or not, it's over. Understand? I don't want you talking to him, again. You're not welcome at my home."

The walls were closing in. *You're not welcome at my home.* So, she didn't believe her. She knew.

Melissa's voice came back through the phone. "You're not the first one, you know." No, Leah didn't know. "He's done this before."

"What?"

"Something was going on, a few years ago. Before you came to the ranch. A girl who work for us, on the farm. Her name was Britney."

Britney. She wasn't the only one. She thought she was special. That George had fallen in love with her. That his feelings were so strong, they made him weak. *Britney.* "He's done this before."

Leah swallowed the pills. She drank the vodka. She put the utility knife in a bag with her wallet and her pillow and her iPod. A time like this called for Macy Gray. But Leah couldn't go to the cave. Outside, it was just too cold. There was a little on the ground, but not much. No more than she might have seen on a rare day in Mississippi. Back where she was from, a small snow like that would have shut everything down. It would have meant breaking news interruptions on the local stations. Excited meteorologists waving their arms, pointing out pictures of computer-image-snowflakes which only their audience could see. It would have meant panic in the Wal-Mart over empty shelves, and housewives shopping with muted hostility, trying to snatch the last carton of milk. It would have meant s'mores by the fireplace, and snow cream made from the white they could scrape off their cars.

Here it meant nothing. It wasn't even the snow that kept her inside. It was the wind. It was only 21 degrees that day, but the wind made it feel like twenty below. The walls of the cave would have blocked a lot of it, but not enough. And she wouldn't have been able to keep her coat on. Blood flows best out of bare arms.

Leah was halfway to the cave before she turned back to her room. She was alone for the weekend. She printed off Melissa's email, wanting to feel it - the ink, the paper, against her hands. She stared at the page until the words were illegible through her tears. *I'm sorry*. She lowered the utility blade until the tip pressed down on the skin of her wrist, and she pulled.

Chapter Sixteen

Leah was on a "Volcano Tour" in Arenal. She couldn't really see the volcano well, though. Thick clouds blocked her view. Someone asked how close a person could walk to the summit, and the guide said that they were standing as close as any tourist could get. A few scientists and park officials had clearance to go closer to the base, for research and to check the stability of the area, but no one else. There had been the sad case of a couple of American hikers a few years ago, the guide told his group. Two people, a man and a woman, had gone hiking out on their own. They ignored the signs warning them about the danger of the volcano. They hiked off the public path, and were killed. *How were they killed?* The question ate away at Leah like maggots on a carcass in the sun. *Molten Lava? Rolling Rocks?* The guide didn't know.

"It's dangerous," he said, and shrugged, as if that should be enough. *Maybe it was the gas. The poison gas. What would it do*

to someone? Make them asphyxiate? Would the asphyxiation happen before or after losing consciousness? Would it make your lungs explode? Bubble your insides out your mouth while you were still awake? Melt your skin off? "It is not possible to get to the top of the Volcano," the guide was saying. Leah thought that must be an exaggeration. What about the movies on those hawaiian islands, with the natives who threw their virgins off the mouth?

Maybe I could do that. Not the virgin part, obviously, but the throwing herself in was still an option. *I wonder how well the internet works at the cafe in town.* She could research what effects the gas could cause. If it was just a gentle case of unconsciousness pending asphyxiation, she could get into that. That didn't seem so bad. But, if it was the make you froth your lungs out, melt your skin off type of gas, Leah was pretty sure that was not the way she wanted to go. And, if the fate of those two American hikers was being crushed by boulders that fell down the side, that didn't seem ideal either. The last thing she needed was to die gradually over hours, alone in the acid rain, under a rock. Even worse, she might light there for hours, in the acid rain, under a rock, and still be "rescued." *Now that would really suck.* Then she'd be a suicidal paraplegic and the victim of international news. No, she definitely needed to check out the gas.

Chapter Eighteen

Roberto took off his shirt, revealing an elaborate tattoo of an eagle stretched across the chiseled musculature of his back. *Holy Mother of God*. This guy made the Statue of David look like an out-of-shape dweeb. *Those biceps should have the right to vote.*

He had caught her looking at him, from her reflection in the side mirror of the truck. His shoulders jostled a bit. Leah thought she saw him smile.

"Your family didn't want to come with you today?" he asked.

"No, I'm in Costa Rica by myself."

He nodded, coolly. "How long have you been here?"

"Almost four weeks."

"Have you learned any Spanish?"

"Si."

"De verdad? Que aprendiste?"

"Aprendí mucho vocabulario. Entiendo mejor que hablo, pero estudio español con textos de la escuela cada noche en mi cuarto."

"Hablas muy bien."

"Gracias. Todavía tengo problemas con las 'R.s'"

He laughed. *"Tienes que practicar,"* he said, rolling the last "r" on the end in an exaggerated manner. "I bet if you keep practicing and come back in a year, you would sound like a Tica."

They climbed into the back of a truck and rode for a couple of miles, through cow pastures, on their way to the canyon. At one point, when the truck passed over a large hole, she slipped from her spot above the back wheel, and he grabbed her arm, steadying her.

There was a bustle of activity at the river. The tour guides looked like ants, moving frenetically in one direction and then, the other, carrying equipment to the river, from the trucks and vans. Before they started hiking down, everyone was fitted with a harness which slid up their legs, and fastened around their waist. The straps were studded with silver D-rings, where they

guides could attach the rope. The harnesses fit tight, and tourists made wise-cracks about packages and "getting their thrills" while the guides strapped them into the apparatus. Leah noticed the proximity between one blushing female tourist and the caramel-skinned young man who was strapping her in. She positioned herself in line so that Roberto would be adjusting her harness.

Roberto's eyes met hers as she stepped forward. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Her chest tingled with butterflies. Her mouth was dry. Roberto leaned over, and as Leah stepped into the harness, she put her hands on his shoulders. She forced her fingers not to grip as Roberto ran the nylon strips up her quivering legs. He pulled down the bunches in her shorts, so the straps fit tight against her bathing suit underneath. "You're shaking." He smirked.

She cleared her throat, embarrassed. "I'm cold."

Roberto pulled tight against the long loose strap around her waist, knocking her off balance. He reached out, and she fell against his arm. He kept his arm around her back as she adjusted her helmet. Put two fingers under her chin. "Can you breathe?"

No. No I can't breathe. She nodded.

"Are you scared?"

She nodded again.

He smiled. "Good. Otherwise, there's no use."

Roberto put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around, so the river was at her back. "You're first."

"First?" Leah started to panic.

"You're the first to rappel. This is the first line down."

"Oh..." Behind her, the banks of the river dropped down 40 feet to the water. Leah was surprised to learn that being suicidal had not alleviated her visceral fear of heights. "I thought we walked down." She immediately felt stupid. *Walk down? Why would we walk down? We're rappelling!*"

"You're going to back up here, just like this." Roberto walked into her, moving her backwards until her feet almost hung off the end of the wooden platform. Her stomach twisted into a knot. He pulled a rope down from the pulley which Leah now noticed suspended over her head. He slipped part of the rope through a ring in her harness, and then clipped the end to the rings at her belly button. She realized she now wore a pair of leather gloves which were too large for her hands. "When you pull this rope underneath your leg, like this, you'll stop."

"I'll stop? When I pull the rope I'll stop?"

"Yes."

"And if I forget to pull the rope?"

Roberto pointed down into the canyon. "Then we have to scrape you off of the rocks."

"Great."

"I am kidding." He put his hand on top of her helmet, and she felt the weight of his arm. "Sunny down below will stop you. Right Sonny?"

"Right!" The other guide called up from below.

Roberto looked in her eyes, giving Leah tunnel vision. "You won't hit bottom, kiddo. Not even if you wanted too."

That's what you think. With the 40 foot drop waiting behind her, and her every sinew clamped tight with fear and cold, Leah was certain she was going to hit bottom. *This is it. It's happening. I'm going to die.*

She backed up to the edge of the wooden platform, the rubber backs of her hiking sandals barely draped over the weathered planks. The air was vibrating around her. She froze. This was harder than she thought.

At the edge of her vision, behind Roberto, a dozen people were standing outside the open booth. They held their hands up close to their mouths and pulled their lips back in a not-smile. If she went down without a problem, they would think to themselves: "She went down just fine. I can do this." And if she fell and splatted herself all over Sunny and the water-covered rocks, they would go back to the trucks, and save themselves from her messy fate. Roberto would slide down the rope, no harness necessary, his bulging arms quivering with regret as he pulled her broken body up from ice-cold water. Leah imagined him feeling her modest figure with those big-well-shaped hands before discovering that her back had been broken in two.

The tourists would never have to see this. It would be a sight only visible to Sunny and Roberto, and the rescue workers that would pull her up the bank and put her in a plastic bag. Christopher would pay for her funeral. She closed her eyes and saw George's face.

"Your left hand stays above you. Your right hand - this is your brake hand. It stays here, down by your leg. Now step back." Leah didn't move. Fear climbed up her throat to her larynx. *How do I step back?* She propped her toe on the edge of the board, suspended over the abyss. One foot was do-able, almost easy. The second step was a doozy.

She dropped. Gravity pulled a scream right out of her. Leah's right hand tightened, instinctually pulling the rope. But she pulled it too late. Sunny stopped her at the bottom. Unsnapped the rope from her harness and helped her to the side of the creek. Cold spray from the waterfall in front of her touched her face. Her body burned. Lights flashed in front of her eyes. *That was fun.* The experience had been almost orgasmic.

Sunny put his hand on her helmet. "Miss, are you ok?"

Leah nodded. "I liked the drop."

She sat on one of the dry boulders at the end of the river, listening to the screams of the vacationing Americans as they slid down the line. Roberto descended, after all the other tourists, *upside-down.*

"Amazing," she said, not realizing she had expelled the word with her breath.

"Yes," said Sunny. "He did special ops in the military a few years ago."

"The US military?"

"Yes," Sunny answered. "Roberto was born in the US."

Roberto held himself at the end of the rope, his head almost touching the water. He smiled at Leah before righting himself and dropping smoothly on the river rocks.

Oh, Hell yes.

Leah followed along behind Roberto in the water. Trying to walk along the sides, clinging to the rocks and roots to stay out of the deep pools of ice cold water in the center. It was still early in the morning. The sun hadn't been able to penetrate the huge trees to reach the water. She gasped when it touched her feet. Her fingers and toes were numb. Roberto noticed how slowly she was making her way along the creek bank, struggling to keep up.

"What's the matter?" he asked. Leah stood clinging tightly to a wall of vines. She'd run out of dry land. Roberto picked her up from underneath her arms and held her out in front of him, like a little girl, her feet suspended only a few inches from the water she had been trying to avoid. "Are you afraid of getting wet?" he asked.

"No." She wasn't afraid of the wet. "I just don't like the cold."

"You have to get used to the water." He lowered her a bit, and she squirmed, pulling her legs up at the knees. "You're going to

get wet. You know that?" He set her down, on the rocks. Just past chilly pool. She could feel the firmness of his hands. "*Verdad, señorita,*" he said. He leaned in close to her face and Leah went liquid all over. "By the end of this trip, you're going to be so wet."