

One

It took two hours and ten minutes for John Wilkerson's fantasy about escaping to paradise to evaporate in the dry Caribbean air. Two hours on a ferry and a short walk around Culebra, a small island off the east coast of Puerto Rico, and John had to face up to the truth. But then, it was his own fault. He should have known that any island that resembled Disney's Neverland from an aerial photo must, at ground level, have more than a few flaws. He should have known not to invent something too fantastic to believe.

Unfortunately, he'd spent months conjuring up images of Culebra, known as the Last Spanish Virgin. Months invested in visions of dark-haired, buxom wenches with castanets on their slender hands and tiers of flounces swirling around their ankles. For weeks before he left Pittsburgh, he heard Spanish guitars thrumming and waves rushing when he drifted off to sleep at night, his girlfriend Zoë coiled around his body. Once or twice he even saw the sheen on the forehead of a *hacienda* owner in his mind's eye. When he and Zoë went to the Squirrel Cage after their day's research at Carnegie Mellon, he now drank rum instead of Yuengling's. And every now and then he caught the delicate scent of frangipani entwined with the mineral intensity of saltwater. He always darted a glance at Zoë whenever he remembered the scent of frangipani. His first love in high school, a bubbly artist named Tilda, had worn frangipani.

These visions stayed with him until he got to Puerto Rico. Instead of chartering a flight to Culebra from San Juan, John spent two bucks on the sleek double-decker ferry from Fajardo. When he arrived at the ferry dock, he found dozens of beachgoers lounging on hard-plastic coolers, holding beach towels and floats, and chatting with more energy than he had at eight a.m. Many drank Medalla or Bud Light, already getting a start on their beach weekend. He heard a toddler's cries and witnessed a mother shush the child. She wore a tube top and shorts, her thighs pockmarked with cellulite, and a bandana around the curlers in her hair. John's images of an island paradise wavered a bit, but still held.

For the first hour on the ferry, he saw nothing but a steely smudge along the eastern horizon where Culebra should be. There wasn't much to do except listen to a CD of Van Morrison and watch the Caribbean, but then his batteries ran dry and he discovered that he hadn't packed replacements. Dropping the CD player in disgust, he ignored the smells of fried food and the rapid flow of Spanish around him. As he leaned over the ferry's railing on the upper deck, John studied the pixellated surface of the ocean, surprised at how much it resembled a poorly compressed movie. Choppy shades of blue, gray, and white jerked and resolved into water and foam and then fractured again into blocks of color. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and lifted his gaze to the horizon.

The steely smudge lingered and without landmarks to confirm the ferry's passage, John's mind played tricks on him. The constant sounds of wind and rushing water convinced him that the ferry labored on a watery treadmill—one which he feared would break down any moment like the taxi he took to the dock—but gradually he discerned the smudge growing and clarifying into a mountainous outcropping of sere green and dusty brown. Except for a smattering of white structures along the northern shoreline, Culebra appeared unsettled. A frontier outpost.

As they approached Dewey, Culebra's one and only town, the last rosy tinge faded from John's vision and reality settled in. No winsome *señoritas*, no Spanish guitars, no *haciendas*. Old men in tank tops sat on two benches in front of a short block of shops painted in dusty pastels.

The small plaza with its tree benches, picnic tables, and old-fashioned streetlights across from the squat terminal with its wall of glass-block windows only made John long for the more stately colonial plazas in Old San Juan. Just beyond the main block, red-and-white columns for a drawbridge reared up behind the tired shops.

As he waited behind a father laden with sand pails, a mountain of beach towels, and an open Medalla, John shifted from foot to foot. At last the father lurched away and John shouldered his backpack, grabbed his bag, and disembarked into paradise, two hours and ten minutes after getting on the ferry.

After a quick tour of downtown Dewey, he returned to the *público* stop near the dock. Four people waited in the sparse shade across the street, talking and drinking beer. Half a block away, a liquor store did a brisk business from foot traffic, including some graying *gringos* who looked more than a bit pickled from sun and drink. When the *público* finally came, John walked all the way to the back, slid into a seat, and stared out the window. His dreams of colonial villas teeming with bougainvillea and surrounded by lush green landscaping had died, and they'd died hard. He glared at the arid and hilly terrain during the whole ten-minute ride to Playa Flamenco, supposedly one of the world's ten best beaches. The architecture relied on the ubiquitous cinderblock and no amount of bright-red blooms softened their angles. At least Wean Hall, in whose bowels his networking lab resided, daunted. These homes just depressed.

When he saw the rusty chain-link fence around the camping area and the sandy field that stood for a parking lot, John almost went back to Dewey. The backpack and bag weighed his arms down and he propped himself against the fence with his eyes closed until he could bring himself to rouse the dozing Culebrense in the shack identified as the camp office. The man shrugged when John asked about renting a locker. John rolled his eyes and turned on his heel, dragging the bags with him. He halfway hid them among some guinea grass near a tree trunk.

Through the palms and over a small rise, laughter and loud music from the mob of weekend beachgoers repelled John from Playa Flamenco and back to the *público*. He'd eaten *huevos rancheros* hours before and his stomach demanded more *cocina criolla*, more Puerto Rican food, before he headed off for snorkeling. The Pepto pink of Señorita's, a two-story guesthouse, drew him in the glare of early afternoon. He enjoyed lunch there so much that his disappointment in not finding paradise began fading and when he rented snorkeling gear, the primitive machine for swiping credit cards only added to Culebra's growing rustic charm. It was time to find out if the snorkeling and diving around Culebra redeemed it altogether.

Half an hour later, he strode toward the trail to Carlos Rosario, a reef that the dive-shop owner had raved about. At the trailhead, he stopped long enough to read the sign posted on the chain-link fence that warned against straying off the trail and into an area littered with U.S. Navy ordnance. John's chest tightened, threatening a familiar panic attack, and he took a step back. Three carefully controlled exhalations seemed to relax his breathing, but he took three more for good measure and stepped onto the lonely, risky path.

A strip of white sand and ocean met him at trail's end. Nothing but the delicious sound of waves susurrating against the shore and an occasional wild cry overhead from a seabird. The crystalline color of the water seduced his screen-weary eyes and something let go of him, some grip of asphalt and glass-walled office buildings, and he breathed in deeply. Even if he saw nothing but rocks and hermit crabs, the surreal blue saltwater against a clear Caribbean sky redeemed his trip, made Culebra a paradise, cellulite thighs and cinderblock eyesores be damned.

A hundred feet out he saw the shadow of coral reef. To the south, a narrow canal separated Culebra from a large cay. The dive-shop owner had recommended the canal for a first snorkel

dive. Of course, the guy had warned against snorkeling alone, but alone with nature was *exactly* what he wanted to be. He'd return to the Carlos Rosario reef after he'd gotten his feet wet in the canal. Grinning at his weak joke, he whistled a short tune. Even weak jokes were funny when Zoë wasn't around.

To get a better idea of what he was getting himself into, John dropped his gear on some bare ground among the clusters of cactus and guinea grass near the trail and climbed a twisted mangrove to look out over the canal. From this height, he saw clumps of turtle grass in the shallow waters where fish of all sizes darted in and out of the swaying blades. Besides the fish and dozens of birds surfing along air currents, not another soul intruded upon his peace. Satisfied with his reconnaissance, he climbed down, stripped off his t-shirt and snatched up the snorkel, goggles, and flippers.

John hadn't snorkeled since senior year at Berkeley, but once he plunged his face underwater he wondered why he'd waited so long to do it again. He'd descended into another world, vast and silent except for the regular gurgle of his breathing in the tube. All around him, organic shapes defied right angles and straight lines, flat planes and intersecting sides. Colors ranging from subdued to garish—but never dull as concrete or bland as limestone—enticed his city-weary eyes. There was a mystery here, a truth so sublime that it defied easy expression into variable and quantity.

He swayed on the current, gazing at parrotfish with their hooked beaks darting among the blue tangs. A squadron of sergeant majors soared over the reef south of him, their black stripes flashing as they banked and turned. Copper-colored squirrelfish with their big brown eyes, ocean surgeonfish, and slender needlefish swarmed ahead of him. Here was primeval life, unaware and unconcerned about the self-important ambition of computer scientists in their office cubicles overgrown with cable and whirring disk drives.

An image of Zoë, tall and sinewy, wavered to life in front of him. His chest tightened and memory overlay his view of trumpetfish hovering among tan sea whips as thick as fingers. Darkness overwhelmed him. He tugged at remembered covers that clung to his torso and legs, but they only entangled him more tightly. Yanking at edges, clumps under his back—anything he could grab onto—he kicked out and then his vision cleared until he saw that a flipper had snagged on some turtle grass.

He panted into the snorkel and waited, his heart racing. Behind him, Zoë's weight shifted and she coiled her arms around his torso, binding him. John blinked and the underwater tableau reappeared. Large yellowtail snapper, a bright yellow stripe racing down their sides to their yellow tails, drifted past. As John turned to follow, an octopus lunged from nowhere at a yellowtail. Writhing arms pinned the hapless fish to the ocean floor. In seconds, it was all over. The octopus injected the yellowtail with poison and stuffed it into its beak.

John flinched. His heart stuttered and thudded. He kicked away from the violent death, but a flipper again caught on turtle grass. His arms thrashed. Spears of sunlight, bubbles, sea grass upended his vision. Then a terrible thing happened. His lips lost their seal on the breathing tube. Saltwater choked him. He flung his face above the surface and spit out the tube. Gaspd a breath. Choked and sputtered. Flaied under again, losing the goggles. Struggled out into sunlight, coughing and sucking at the air. He slipped under; pushed up again. Missed a breath, slid down. Inhaled more water. Ears ringing, he popped up a final time. Then he swatted once at the water before slipping under the surface. The heaviness of saltwater filled his lungs just as two arms grabbed him from behind and pulled him free of the water. The pressure in his lungs eased and the pounding in his brain faded to black.

Dizzy awareness returned to him. He couldn't focus his eyes. Everything was a blur. His shoulder and side hurt. His chest spasmed. He coughed weakly, but something soft and firm wrapped his mouth. He wanted to lift a hand to brush it away, but his arm refused to move and he coughed again. The pressure on his mouth lifted and then he retched warm saltwater until nothing came up. He continued to heave and shake. Someone laid a hand on his back; a gentle vibration spread through his torso, soothing his retching.

The hand remained while he breathed. The dizziness subsided gradually. He had no idea how much time had passed and cared only for the implacable ground beneath him, the concerned fingers on his back. When he felt that he could move without causing the world to spin, he rolled to see his rescuer. The hand dropped away and he felt bereft. His eyes, still clouded by saltwater, refused to focus on her face. He had an impression of luminous skin, and two bare breasts peeking through a curtain of dark hair.

"Thank you." The words croaked from his ravaged throat. Then he passed out again.

John's savior sat some minutes, watching him. Then she leaned forward and pressed several fingertips to his neck, feeling for his pulse. It was there, strong and steady. She let her hand slide along the skin of his jaw, brushing the hair away from his cheek. She put a light fingertip on his mouth, now a warm red. Her lips tingled and she leaned her face closer—perhaps she could press her lips there again? He moaned and rolled his head against the stones. The mermaid snatched her hand back and waited, her breath held, but he didn't move again. She didn't touch him a second time; instead, she caressed the hard muscles of his calves with her gaze. She looked away from his feet though. One still wore one of those pseudo-flippers that always made her shiver.

She had, of course, seen countless humans before—snorkeling and diving, on shore and on deck. But she'd never *touched* one before, never felt the dry skin that prickled with fine hairs. This man overwhelmed her. Already the sun had evaporated most of the water on his chest, which was covered with dark hair. Not like a merman, smooth and sleek and slender. His chest, shoulders, and hips were wider and his frame bulkier. His flesh was a different color, too. He was pale, but not shark-belly pale like the *mer* people. His skin held warmth, the warmth of sun-bleached wood. Only his long dark hair resembled a merman's. Her nostrils flared at his scent. She had no words to describe it other than hot and dry, but she used those words for the shore and he didn't smell like the shore. He smelled like the wind from distant lands.

A voice, sandy and familiar, abraded her thoughts. "What have you done, young one?"

The mermaid looked up to see an ancient woman as gnarled and twisted as the roots of the trees that grew at the shore's edge. The woman picked her way across the stones toward the place where the mermaid sat. She stopped a few feet away. Freeing her bag, which the mermaid had always seen at her waist, the old woman rummaged around for a few moments before withdrawing something. Then she came forward and nudged John with her foot. He didn't stir.

"Pulled him out of the water, did you? Cough up all the water he breathed in?" The mermaid nodded. "And his heart's beat is still strong?" The mermaid nodded again. "He'll live then."

She bent and tugged the flipper from the man's foot. When it came off, the mermaid let a sharp sound escape her.

The ancient one laughed, a sound like dry stones shifting. "You think he's strange? No wonder you find him so interesting, girl." She smiled. It spread like seal oil on water. "I can help him, if you'd like." She paused and waited. The mermaid stole a glance at the man and nodded. "This herb tincture will rouse him. I'll see to it that he's recovered his senses and can walk. You'd best get going. I'll tell him I found him here."

The mermaid nodded again. After one more look at the unconscious man, she propelled herself backward with her hands, her tail lifted slightly above the stones. Once she was in the water, she paused, her gaze taking in the wide stance of the ancient woman, who stood over the stranger as though he were *her* bounty from the waters. Was this all there was to saving a man's life?

Before she could lower herself underwater and speed away, the old woman called to her.

"Oh, yes, young one, I need some turtle grass, and a sea cucumber. And one of those pink sea urchins, you know the ones."

There was nothing of the usual promise of a human artifact or any stories about the human world on this island. The mermaid nodded. It was the old woman's price for keeping her secret.

When John regained consciousness, he found a wizened old woman hunched over him holding what looked like a mini-bar liquor bottle. But its rank liquid was no whiskey that he'd ever smelled. Upon seeing her wild, white hair and a burning right eye in a face like a walnut, he sat up quickly. She chortled and hunkered down, her ragged skirt splayed across her bony knees.

"So, you don't like the smell? Strong it is. Just be glad you aren't dead, then, and can smell it." Her voice crackled. Her accent was odd, not like the locals.

John shook his head, trying to clear the confusion that still hung over his thoughts. "Who ...?"

The old woman just sat there and looked at him. He cleared his throat and began again.

"Who pulled me from the water?"

"You were pulled from the water?"

"Yes." A cough interrupted him. "Almost drowned."

"What'd he look like?"

He shifted his position on the rocky shore, bracing himself and pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Not he, she."

"She? Then you did see her?" The woman's voice was sharp.

"No." He shook his head. "Not really."

The old woman at first said nothing; instead, she wrapped the top of the bottle with a bit of cloth and then tied that with string. She dropped this bottle into a bag that lay on the rocks behind her before turning to face him again.

Finally, she spoke. "You were lying on the beach. You were breathing; you weren't dead. That's when I put my tincture under your nose."

John recalled the foul odor of the tincture, grateful that she hadn't poured it down his throat. "Thanks."

"It's little enough I did." She shrugged. "If you want a doctor, there's one in the *pueblo*, across the plaza from the dock. But you're all right."

Without waiting for him to agree, she picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. She headed toward the east and the low-growing shrubs there. Not sure what he should do or say next, John sat watching her go. As she reached the edge of the rocks, the old woman turned for a parting shot.

"You should thank God for your life." She raised her chin toward the water of the canal and continued, "The ocean is as lethal as it's lovely. You'd do well to remember."

She disappeared into the shrubs and darkening shadows, going who knew where. John, feeling chastised, sat for a long moment before studying the rocks near where he'd been laying.

There was nothing to show how he'd gotten ashore, no footprints, no drag marks. No way of knowing where his rescuer had come from or gone to. Why hadn't she stayed around?