

“Okay, honey,” he said. “Cast out the line.”

Cordelia squinted at the light bouncing off the flat water, at the pure radiance of the blue mixing with sunlight. In the same moment, she arced her fat arm back then threw her weight forward. The fishing line flew out towards the sea, her small body stumbling with it, and hit the water. A strong arm wrapped around her middle, steadying her as the boat rocked.

“Now what?” she asked.

“We wait!” Her father took the fishing pole from her hands and set it in the clamp.

“How long?”

“Until there’s a bite.”

“How long until there’s a bite?”

Her father shrugged and peered down at her. She couldn’t see his eyes behind the sunglasses. Only her own tanned face. Her brown hair turning golden from spending so much time in the sun. She giggled at her reflection. “Daddy, I can see myself!”

Her father laughed and pulled the black sunglasses from his face. Cordelia stuck out her fat hands, fingers stretching, until the plastic was in her grasp. She clumsily shoved on the black sunglasses, far too big for her six-year-old face, and smiled with missing teeth.

“They look good on you, honey,” her father said with a smile. She could see his eyes now. Blue and rimmed in a tan line. He looked like a raccoon. She told him as much.

He responded by plucking the sunglasses from her face, returning them to his. “I like you without them better,” he said, that smile broadening to show his white teeth. “I get to see your ocean eyes.”

Cordelia set her hands on her hips. Her shoulders, exposed in her yellow tank top, were getting too red, but she didn't really notice. She only enjoyed the heat of the sun. Didn't care if it burned her scalp and the rims of her ears.

"Did you put on sunscreen before we left?" her father asked, touching a finger to her red shoulder. When he lifted it, the skin was white. "You're getting burned."

"Mommy put some on."

"Go put more on. I'll watch our lines."

She turned and scampered across the boat, pebble-raised white floors slick with salt water. Under the overhang was her pink drawstring bag, a tie-dye peace sign on its polyester exterior, and she shoved her hand in, groping for the spray. Finding it, she twisted it unlocked and began to spray her scorched skin, sunscreen mist lodging in her throat, and she held her breath.

"Rub it in, Cordy," her father called, watching from where he sat by their lines. She obeyed, listening to the subtle thunking of waves as they hit the bottom of the boat. The sway of the small vessel, the sun beating down.

"Cordy!" It was her father, and she whipped her head toward him. "I think you've got a bite!"

A smile brandished, she rushed over.

"Don't run, don't run," he called. She didn't.

Her father pulled her purple pole from the clamp, handed it to her. "Ready to use those muscles?"

She nodded, steeling herself.

"Okay. Reel it in, ocean eyes."

It was early, but the airport was still bustling. Cordelia stood with just her mother, backpack around her shoulders and suitcase stuffed with bathing suits and wetsuits and towels standing at her side.

“Don’t get eaten by great whites.” Her mom straightened Cordelia’s jacket sleeves. “And don’t forget to call me when you land. Oh, and send pictures of the turtles.”

“Mom—”

“Oh, and please, Cordelia, for the love of God, be careful with the oxygen tanks.”

“Mom!” Cordelia moved out of her reach, rolling her suitcase with her. “You’re fussing.”

Her mom huffed, setting her hands on her wide hips. She did not have a swimmer’s body. Her hair was brown, mousy, lacking the gold that streaked Cordelia’s. Her skin was pale, and her mind was a lawyer’s mind, not a researcher’s.

“It’s just,” her mom began, “Tony—I mean, your father...” She shook her head, eyes glossing over with tears.

“Mom...”

“Oh, I’m fine,” her mom said, and wiped her eyes. “You’re an adult now. You’ve been one for years. You can make your own decisions.”

Cordelia felt her heart sink. “I’ll come back,” she said, reaching to grasp her mom’s hand. “I promise.”

Her mom’s gaze softened, brown eyes that did not match her daughter’s looking down at the tiled floor beneath her feet. People moved around them, left and right, heading hurriedly towards airport security or the baggage check counter. Cordelia waited in her mother’s silence, discreetly checking her watch. She had two hours until she was supposed to board.

“Mom, I’ve got to go.”

Slowly, her mom nodded. She raised her gaze again, lifted her delicate chin, and swallowed. “I know you’re capable of taking care of yourself, sweetheart. I just...”

Cordelia nodded, understanding. Her mother didn’t need to explain. She was going to Cairns. Continuing the research her father had never been able to finish. And her mother didn’t want to lose her, too. Lose her to that ocean and reef and vastness.

Suddenly her mom walked forward and wrapped her arms around her daughter. Cordelia closed her eyes and hugged her back, squeezing tightly.

“Research only,” her mother said quietly, breath rustling the wisps of Cordelia’s hair that had fallen out of her braid. “Don’t go looking for that boat.”

“I won’t.”

Her mother seemed satisfied and loosened her grip. Her hands found Cordelia’s shoulders. “You and Danny watch that weather. And the shark advisory.”

“Bye, Mom.”

“I love you. Tell Danny I said hi.”

“I will, and I love you, too,” Cordelia said with a reassuring smile. Grabbing her suitcase and wrapping her fingers around her backpack strap, she turned before her mother could stop her. She didn’t look back, not as she checked in her bags and headed towards security. She knew her mother waited and watched. Wouldn’t leave until she couldn’t see Cordelia anymore. Until her daughter had passed through security and rounded the corner towards her gate.

“How’s Joan?” Danny asked as Cordelia finally sat down beside him at the gate. She’d stopped to get a cup of coffee, and she sipped at it tentatively lest it burn the roof of her mouth.

“Fine. Nervous,” she said. “She says hi.”

Danny nodded, his blonde hair shifting with the movement. “Well, can you blame her for being nervous?”

“No.” Cordelia sipped at her coffee again. It was far too hot. “You’d just think that when her twenty-seven-year-old daughter is going to Australia for a life-changing research trip, she’d be more excited. Less... *attentive*.”

Danny snorted, leaning back in the uncomfortable airport chair and stretching his long limbs. “*Attentive*. What a nice way of putting it.” He was quiet for a moment as he and Cordelia scanned the space around them. When he spoke again, his normally calming voice was grave. “You didn’t tell her that we’re not just going to track coral bleaching rates, did you?”

“What do you think?”

Danny’s mouth thinned into a tight line. “Cordy...”

“I don’t need you lecturing me,” she said before he could say more. “Just stay in your lane.”

He raised his hands in defeat. “Fine,” he said. He tilted his head, hazel eyes glittering with amusement. “Did you bring the Xanax?”

She scowled at him. “Yes. And don’t you dare laugh.”

“I’m not laughing.”

Cordelia turned to rifle through her backpack and pulled out the prescribed relaxer. She pointed to the water bottle Danny had bought at the airport kiosk and popped one of the pills into her mouth. He handed her the water bottle, and she washed the pill down, sighing with relief as she knew that soon the tightening of her chest would be loosened.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We will now proceed with boarding of flight number 1481 to Cairns. We would like to start with families with small children and any passengers with disabilities...”

Danny turned towards the desk at the gate and sighed, glancing at Cordelia, who was taking deep breaths. He shook his head. “Can’t wait to look after your high ass for twenty-plus hours.”

Cordelia stood, shouldered her backpack, and glared. “Shut up, Danny.”

There were times when Cordelia could not remember her father’s voice. What it had sounded like. She could only remember what she had felt when he’d talked to her, when he’d pointed to the water on the dock and told her to look. Look at the expanse of the ocean, the curve of the earth, the glitter of the sun on the never-ending water. A world so deep and vast that no man would ever be able to know all of its secrets.

But he would try, he’d tell her. He’d get farther than any man ever had.

He’d reminded her of it the day he set out on the coast of Cairns, Australia, in his research boat. With a crew of five marine-biologists, the boat sped over two-hundred miles into the Coral Sea. Past the Great Barrier Reef and into ocean sliced up only by a few scattered islands. Beyond, there was nothing. Just that great expanse. A researcher’s dream.

“What are you searching for, Dad?” Cordelia had asked him over the phone, her mother beside her on the couch. Safe and grounded back home in Del Mar, California.

“Those secrets I told you about, honey,” he’d said, voice tired. She hadn’t understood the time difference then.

“Will you see turtles?” Cordelia had always loved turtles. Great big ones with black almond eyes and burnt brown scales.

“Probably.” He’d paused, but she remembered how when he’d spoken again, something in her chest had squeezed. “I love you, ocean eyes.”

“I love you, too.” Her hands, no longer fat from childhood, had gripped the phone. “Send me pictures of the secrets you find.”

But he’d never sent those pictures. Never came back to Cairns’ shores. Never came home.

Cordelia had stood on the beach back in Del Mar, sun-kissed brown hair braided down her back, and had waited, squinting those ocean-blue eyes and scanning that curved horizon. As if that research boat would come bobbing over it, her father standing at its helm, gilded hair ruffled by sea wind. The captain of his ship.

Eventually, she’d stopped waiting. Instead, she’d started searching.

Cairns was dead. So much so that it felt smaller than it really was. High-rise hotels mixed with dingy hostels, and street signs creaked in the cool winter breeze. A shopping mall with a movie theater stood before the backdrop of mountains, misty and wet in rain that could not yet freeze. Frozen yogurt places sat open and empty, immigrant cashiers leaning heavily against the counters, counting the minutes until they could lock up and go home. At night, the bats flew, large membranous wings spreading out against the dusk-colored sky. They gathered in the tree by the city library, the limbs of the large curtain fig draped in their dark, hanging masses.

It was nothing like Del Mar. No purple hydrangeas lining the soft, sandy beaches. No velvet-eared bunnies rustling in the bushes, hiding away from the old train tracks or children climbing the rocks. No children at all.

“It’s because they’re in school,” Danny said. “It’s not summer here.”

No, it was not summer in Cairns. Hostels were empty, backpackers unwilling to brave the mountain-sea town in the winter. The cold waters and misty winds. The mudflats that appeared

at night when the tide got low, exposing not white sandy beaches but instead crabs digging into black sea mud, dead fish flopping with their mouths open as they gasped for breath.

“It’s kind of... creepy here.” Cordelia peered out the window, half hiding behind the stained drapes emblazoned with green palm trees. She turned to see Danny peeling the sheets back from his twin bed, kneeling to inspect the seams of the mattress.

“Danny, what are you doing?”

“Checking for bedbugs.”

Cordelia set her hands on her hips and arched a brow. “Seriously?”

“Can never be too safe, Cordy.” He stood and headed towards the twin bed she’d claimed by the window. “Bedbugs can ruin an entire trip.”

“Are you checking my bed, too?”

“I am.”

Cordelia sighed and rolled out her neck, still tired and strained from the unbearably long flight across the Pacific. She hadn’t minded when they’d only had the budget for one room. Danny was not just her research partner at UC San Diego, but also her good friend. They’d never shared a hotel room before, though, not since spring break during their sophomore year of college when she’d gotten so drunk, she’d confused his Motel 6 room for hers. She’d woken up the next morning to find Danny sleeping on the floor, hair covered in Florida sand.

He seemed satisfied with his bedbug search as he stood from his crouch and pushed up his gray sweatshirt sleeves, revealing his tanned arms. “I say we order pizza tonight,” he said. “I already checked on Yelp to find a good place: Joe’s Pizza. They’ve got that thick crust you like.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes. “You checked on Yelp?”

“Mmm hmm. I have a whole list of places where we can eat. Also got an itinerary for outside of our research trips.” He looked rather satisfied with himself, an excited smile starting to pull at his lips. “I gotta call the boat guys and the Australian scientists in the morning to confirm some stuff. But since tomorrow is a free day, I think we should go whitewater rafting.”

“Whitewater rafting? In this weather?”

He nodded seriously. “The rates are better now, anyway. *Because* of the weather.”

Cordelia found herself not caring about the rates. She wanted to take those rates and chuck them into the cold white water they rafted through the next day. She shivered in her black bikini and board shorts, her fingers burning on the metal of her paddle, like dry ice searing her sun-accustomed skin.

Rates. Those rates could kiss her ass.

“At least we’re out of that creepy town,” Danny had said as they’d filed out of the bus that took them into the misted mountains.

But even in the peace of those mountains, cold white river water spraying up and into her face, Cordelia felt haunted. As the whitewater rafting instructor urged them to keep rowing, rocks like slick daggers breaking up the water ahead, she turned her eyes to the trees bowing above the brook like outstretched arms. A breeze caused their bark to groan, the craping of metal echoing with it from a pickup truck, flipped and abandoned in the trees.

“Come on, everyone!” the instructor urged, his voice echoing across the river and shocking Cordelia out of her stupor. “Can’t be stuffed, yet.”

She had no idea what ‘stuffed’ meant in the context of rafting, but Cordelia pushed her paddle into the icy water, rowing hard, leaving the thoughts of the abandoned pickup and those who had condemned it behind.

It was hard imagining her father liking it in Cairns. Him, an incarnation of a sunbeam. A living, breathing shimmer of light, as passionate and determined as a crashing ocean wave. She couldn’t imagine it. Him walking along the mudflats amongst the swarms of chittering fruit bats. Him sitting down at a restaurant to eat mediocre seafood—something Danny found unacceptable. (“It’s a town on the fucking ocean, Cordy, and the highest rated seafood restaurant only has four stars on Yelp. *Four!*”)

She couldn’t see him in anything. Not the mudflats or the trees or mountains or gray skies. She felt her heart straining for the ocean, out towards that terrible vastness. A terrible vastness that felt more like home to her than the land.

Maybe there she’d find him. The pieces of his soul scattered out on that water. The remnants of his boat. The memories that could have been.

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this story, please email me at:
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