



*Volcano
Baby*

BY MEGAN AMARA ROSE

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – A Small Town

Chapter 2- The Beach

Chapter 3 – Rats

Chapter 4 – Downward Spiral

Chapter 5- Black-Outs

Chapter 6- Ghosts

Chapter 7 -Digging

Chapter 8 – Waves

Chapter 9-Night Terrors

Chapter 10 -Jailhouse

Chapter 11- Glimmer

Chapter 12- Flee

Chapter 13- Forced Home

Chapter 14- Tahiti

Chapter 15- Threshold

Chapter 16- The Eruption

Chapter 17- Health Care

Chapter 18- Raw

Chapter 19 – Short Circuit

Chapter 20- Mine Fields

Chapter 21-The Beginning

Note To Reader

Volcano Baby is a true story written from the perspective of Megan Amara Rose. The dialogue and scene details have been written to reflect the author's experiences as accurately as possible and to reflect the general themes of events. Names, locations, and identifying characteristics of people and places have been changed. To those who are going through difficult awakenings and struggling to face and heal from trauma, may you find a sense of safety and feel the presence of those who want to see you free and thriving. If you are sensitive or adverse to reading about traumatic experiences, discretion advised.

Chapter 1- A Small Town

I grew up in a small farm town with one blinking yellow light. It doesn't matter which small town. They are all pretty similar. You can be standing on any one of the wide flat streets that have no sidewalks in any of these small towns, and in at least one direction, you will see the silhouette of an oak tree against the backdrop of a wheat field. These towns are so small that wherever you stand, you always have at least one view to the edge of them. Most of the homes are single story with tidy lawns, and in the summer, when the rain has long since stopped and the water bills skyrocket, many of the lawns turn from deep green to hay bale tan. My mom detested the crispy dry grass, but I loved our yard during summertime. I especially loved climbing the walnut tree out front. My next-door neighbor and I spent endless hours perched up there pretending it was a spaceship, using a knobby outcropping as the control center. From there, we would let our imagination fly us far away from home. I saw this small-town life through the eyes of the second youngest of six kids in a popular Catholic family. I was born the day after Mt. St Helens erupted, which made me the volcano baby.

In our little town, we never had to lock our doors or worry about strangers. Outside of our houses, we didn't have a care in the world, and in the summers, we were free to run wild with a whole pack of neighborhood kids. My siblings told me that my mother would ring a cowbell from the front porch when it was time to come

home to eat, but I can't say I remember that. I do remember Jim the gum man, as we called him. He was a tall old man in ratty jeans with his big belly protruding from a thin button-up shirt who would ride his bike around, ringing the bell mounted on his handlebars. We would run towards the sound to find him when we heard the metal bell jingle. He would pull a warm package of bubble gum from his pocket with little more than a grunt and give us each a mushy piece of gum. It was a highlight of the long summer days. Looking back, it was creepy, but he was harmless as far as I know. We didn't think about him because all we cared about was that the sound of the bell meant soon, we would taste that burst of artificial flavor in our salivating mouths. We squeezed every drop of short-lived juiciness out of each piece by chomping, smacking, and blowing giant bubbles that burst sticky film on our already dirty faces. Thinking of summers spent outside, running wild through daffodil fields, and climbing trees in our little town brings a sense of joy and freedom. It was the black skies and long cold rainy winters stuck inside when stress was high and there was nowhere to go that brought out the terror.

My mom started having kids at twenty-one, and she was done by thirty-one, having all six of us within ten years. My dad was a teacher and lauded coach, and my mom stayed home while we were young to raise us. I never considered us poor, although I now understand we barely made ends meet. Making groceries last until payday didn't always happen, which weighed heavy on my parent's minds. Despite

running low on groceries and having to bundle up in the winter when the house was too expensive to keep heated, we somehow always had new shoes for each sport. My mom did our hair every morning, so we looked nice to go to school. She would sit on the brown plaid couch with a plastic comb and dip it in a glass of water before yanking it through our matted heads of hair, showing no mercy on our tangles. It is an understandable strategy when you have five heads of hair to get through before school starts. I understand, but I wonder if the rough treatment had more to do with following our families aggressively enforced yet unconscious and unspoken golden rule: looking good mattered more than feeling good. I didn't know anything different, nor did my parents, and on the surface level, I was proud to be a part of my family. We were also church-going Catholics; however, faith was not a topic of conversation in our household. Sports was pretty much all we talked about, and sports seemed to be the source of life, which made athletics our family's true religion.

The town I grew up in was conservative, as are most rural towns. Being from a "good" family was the highest compliment. To be a "good" family, these were the rules: do well in sports, stay fit, get good enough grades to stay in sports, feel sorry for and sacrifice for others, don't show any signs of weakness, and finally, don't do anything out of the norm. Survival is simple if you follow the rules.

Most of our friends seemed to think our family was perfect, and they saw my parents as generous, handsome, and loving. Regardless of what people thought of our family, good athletes are almost always popular, especially in small towns. We feel like

celebrities. We get our pictures in the local paper, and we get on the homecoming court. I liked the attention, but I couldn't wait to get out of my hometown.

I wasn't totally conscious of the reasons behind my need to flee my home. I didn't know there were large parts of my childhood, huge pieces to my puzzle, which were not accessible to me. I didn't realize I had blacked out and buried what had hurt too much to stay awake for, leaving it to pressurize within me.

I stood out as "odd" or "different" from others in my small town and family. Those are my mother's own words to describe me. I was a bit of a runt, outspoken, and highly sensitive. Instead of embracing a supporting role as a cute, quiet, socially pleasing fifth child, I challenged everything. I developed an atomic will to prove myself just as capable as everyone else, especially my two oldest sisters. They appeared to me as giant untouchable superstars, and they barely noticed me. I was small-boned, at least a head shorter than all four sisters, and merely a dumbbell to our oldest brother. Despite my physical limitations, I excelled beyond expectations to become a collegiate All-American in track & field. In my family, all athletic talent was credited to our dad and genetic superiority, the latter of which I clearly didn't inherit. So, in a way, my unlikely success was a blip in the family storyline. I think part of what made me such a good runner was related to being pressurized. You hear of mothers who can lift cars to rescue their trapped children. They tap into extraordinary amounts of adrenaline and determination to ensure survival. I imagine similar physics was at play for me to defy my stunted growth and become a powerful sprinter. My coach in

college told me, pound for pound, I was the best athlete he had ever coached. This was meant as a compliment, but my defensive interpretation of everything also suggested I would never quite match up, which felt insulting. A pit bull lived inside me to protect me from my insecurity and would bite the head off anyone who doubted or pitied me.

I stood out in other ways too, never having a mind for surface details. I became much more attentive to that hidden in plain sight, but everyone acted like it wasn't. Naively, I have had difficulty understanding why not everyone shares my interest in the elephant in the room and the skeletons in the closet. I'm starting to get it more now. You don't win popularity contests by poking around in other people's underworlds.

Later, I would learn, in psychological terms, I dropped into this life in just the right shape and size to fit into the role of the family scapegoat. The scapegoat is the one who is seen as problematic, pathological, or crazy because they tend to address problems others don't see or are trying to hide or avoid. It was implied, "You must be the crazy one if you suggest a problem." Without knowing the forces at play, the family system unconsciously discredits the scapegoat to ensure the pack's survival. I didn't know about this dynamic. I just felt constant amorphous frustration, like I never had the information to untangle myself. Part of me always sensed something was wrong, but I would never have and could have never imagined the root of it all. If the family does their job well, the scapegoat doesn't trust herself and leaves the

two-ton elephants and generations of skeletons alone. If the scapegoat persists in uncovering and pointing out the ugly truth, they will be spit out of the family system and, if they can hold on and survive, perhaps given a chance at freedom.

Part of me did my best to hold up the story of the perfect family, but as soon I got the chance, I flew as far away as possible from home. My mind always tells one story, and my body always acts out another story, the true one.

Once I graduated high school, I couldn't wait to leave my hometown and never come back unless it was when I got rich and famous and could return to prove myself worthy and sane to my family. This drive was coming from the scapegoated part of me desperately trying to earn validation. I was developing a powerful and complex ego; however, I don't say that as an insult. It has been my experience that my life and everyone's lives have been shaped and pushed forward by a whole web of forces. I wouldn't want to reduce any of it to a concept, such as 'ego' that isn't fully understood. I was a complicated and vulnerable young woman looking everywhere but inside myself for answers. I was all puffed up on small-town popularity and running off a strange rocket fuel blend of insecurity, adrenaline, and self-righteousness. I was developing an intricate inner system of self-protection, which is what I mean when I say ego.

Heading into college, academics weren't a priority, and being a track athlete got me through school. However, after over a decade of competitive running, which seemed to do little to earn me the respect I longed for in my family, my last college

track meet was a relief. I was ready for it to be over and prepared to move on and search for my sense of worth and meaning elsewhere. In hindsight, the lack of interest from my family in my accomplishments helped me avoid the trap of nostalgia, which can keep many athletes stuck in the past, where we often feel the most valuable.

In my final year of college, a few classes piqued my interest, and my focus shifted away from sports. It was primarily because of one teacher. She was an eccentric Christian feminist scholar who wore tiaras in her free time and loved cats. She was the most brilliant and fascinating woman I had ever met, and I respected her greatly. In her class, for the first time, I was learning things about the world that made sense, such as how people can become blindly dominated by systemic forces like mass media, government, and religion. I don't remember her mentioning the family system, but that doesn't mean she didn't. I'm learning we only hear what supports our sense of safety, and we filter out the rest until we are ready. This teacher seemed to recognize something in me too, which was pivotal. Someone was finally interested in a non-physical aspect of me. She was interested in my way of thinking about things.

I took an interest in politics and social justice. In my final months of college, I decided I wanted to become a journalist. I recognized the media's influence on people and wanted to be one of the good guys. During 9/11, I became glued to the news. I felt I had formed a personal relationship with the late ABC news anchor Peter Jennings. He had the most critical role in the world, ushering us all through the shock and grief of the crisis. At the time, I was renting a dilapidated studio apartment

attached to the back of an old house near campus. I would glue myself to the TV screen for the nightly news, eat cold spaghetti O's out of the can and drink cheap white wine from a plastic cup. I added a journalism minor to my final few terms of school and coincidentally made friends with some of the local journalists when I was out partying. I invited myself in as an intern at the local ABC station. It was easy for someone who looked and acted like me – white, petite, and knowing how to act in a way that made others, especially men, feel better about themselves.

Upon graduating, there was an unexpected opening at the news station for a job as an assistant producer, a position I knew nothing about because I had been shadowing the reporters. I wouldn't have known about the job opening, but the news director noticed me as an intern and called me to ask me to come to his office to discuss the position.

The morning of the meeting, I was nervous. I had the perfect outfit, which seemed the most essential part of the preparation for an interview. I didn't do any reading or research to prepare myself. Instead, I set my alarm to wake up early to straighten my hair and get my makeup right. I made a pot of coffee, smoked a few cigarettes, and the thought of eating breakfast never occurred to me. My life revolved around appearances. It was the only way I knew to get things I thought I wanted and needed.

Arriving at the news station felt like what arriving on a movie set might feel like to a Hollywood actor. I felt an air of importance that appealed to the insecure

small-town girl in me. I swung open the reception area doors like I was the next Katie Couric. The secretary told me to head up to the newsroom, that Mr. Goldstein, the news director, was expecting me. I walked up the stairs and rounded the corner to the newsroom, where several reporters, with personalities that extended several feet beyond their bodies, bustled around with serious looks on their faces as they got ready to head out for the day. The news director sat behind a computer at a giant desk in his white-walled office that looked out onto the newsroom. When I walked in, the reporters briefly looked up, noted my arrival, and returned to doing what they were doing. The news director, who was also acutely aware of everything happening in his newsroom, must have noticed the head turns and the shift in the atmosphere because he looked up from his desk and waved me in. He was a small intimidating man with a bald head and mustache. He was always dressed in a suit and tie and rarely smiled. He greeted me and invited me to sit down before explaining that the assistant producer position was highly competitive. He told me he was going out on a limb considering me for the job and explained that he just had a feeling about me. I took it as a compliment and tried not to grin as I relaxed my shoulders and sat up straighter in my chair. I crossed my legs and made circles with my pink suede high heels. I felt on top of the world. He must have sensed my arrogance because his tone changed, “Don’t make me wrong about you.” My stomach flipped on itself, and I swallowed hard, deflated by his words. I lost track of what he was saying momentarily, but to my great relief, after a bit more discussion, he offered me the job producing the 6:00 and

6:30pm live evening newscasts, which at the time in the year 2004, paid a starting wage of \$10.00 per hour. I readily accepted. I was twenty-four years old, had a steady long-term boyfriend, and had won what appeared to be a fortunate career break.

It only took a few months of working at the news station before my mental fantasies of heroism and fame disintegrated into reality. I realized neither my nerves nor my soul was cut out for the demands of such a career.

I didn't die, but on the drive home at night, I would chain smoke and pick at my skin until suddenly, I was in my driveway, not knowing how I got there. When I got inside my apartment, I would open a bottle of wine and start chugging, waking up with bloodshot eyes, skin that looked like a minefield, an aching head, and a body full of dread, which I treated with makeup, coffee, ibuprofen, and cigarettes. The days would repeat like this until Friday and Saturday, when I would "go out" with friends and earn myself a hangover that would last well into the week.

The workdays were intense, and there wasn't a moment to spare to get the two shows written and ready to air. My desk sat between the news director and the executive producer, who I could feel exchanging amused looks over my head as I panic-wrote the newscasts. I barely even went to the bathroom or drank water, let alone stop to eat lunch. By the end of the day, my cuticles bled, and my eyes were rimmed in fire. The pressure of live TV, the power dynamics between reporters, the egos and attitudes, and the intimidation tactics from my male superiors kept me in a constant low-level panic. As much as part of me loved the excitement and the feeling

of being let into this exclusive and exciting world, my body couldn't take it. My soul was also challenged. Producers had a relatively great deal of power regarding what would be written in the newscast, including which stories would run, how much time a story would get, and what order stories would appear in the show. The only person who overrode our decisions was the news director and sometimes, but rarely, the senior anchors. When I was asked to change things around or leave something out based on the interests of corporate advertisers, which in this case was almost always the local Walmart, a little voice inside me would put up a big protest. Everyone talked about censoring like it was the enemy, and there was a culture of bold and clever banter against it. Still, when it came down to it, nobody could be bothered to do anything about it. The part of my personality putting up a fight was an idealist. If journalism was about money more than the people, we would have a big problem.

I knew within a few months of working at the news station that I could not physically nor psychologically survive a career in news, but instead of admitting weakness, I emphasized to myself the story of ethical superiority. Had my nervous system been less scared for its life, I may have stuck with the job and focused on a different story. I would have adopted the clever banter and the story about making minor ethical compromises to reach the top where one could have a serious positive influence. I wanted to think I was morally superior, but ultimately, the bone-rattling fear I felt day in, and day out became the deal breaker for a career in news. Later I would learn our work environments often mirror to us similar patterns of emotional

and energetic experiences as we had in our family environments -each person playing their respective role – the boss invoking the silent and confusing terror of the father, the office bully reducing you to the size of a pea, in the same way, your sister once did, and so on. However, I still needed many more years of examples before I was ready to see this.

When I decided to quit the producer job, I asked for a meeting with the news director, who, by this time, scared me so much that I would nearly black out in his presence. I envied the ruthless and cocky female reporters who, like my older sisters, were less affected by cowardly yet highly effective authority figures. When the time came to meet, and he called me into his office, I was disoriented with fear. My thoughts raced through script after script of what I would say and how I would explain my resignation. My stomach stung with the dread of feeling like I was about to get in trouble. Even though I wasn't doing anything wrong, my body must have believed that disappointing the man in charge was a recipe for punishment. Back then, these traces of my childhood were not conscious and were nothing more than wordless ghosts that haunted me through elevated heart rates, foggy thinking, and stomach aches.

When I finally met him, I don't remember what I said. All I remember was the sudden and unexpected shock when he took my resignation well. I was bracing myself for something painful, but to my surprise, he was soft and kind. Part of me wondered if I was crazy. Had I imagined his intimidation tactics? His sudden change of character

was disorienting, and the fog of dread turned to self-doubt. He even pleaded with me to stay through the rating period and told me I was doing a great job and that he was sorry to hear the job wasn't for me.

His approval and drastic personality change confused me, but it was also a relief to be "safe" from an aggressive reaction. I agreed to stay a few more months to get through the rating season, which I did, but not a day longer. My short stint in mainstream news was enough to catapult me in a completely different direction. I was clearly not going to survive in the mainstream.

During my last few months at the news station, my boyfriend decided he and his friends were going on a surf trip to Panama. It got me thinking about what escaping somewhere distant and tropical would be like. I had always hated the heavy, dark, cold Pacific Northwest winters. The thought of a sunny beach, away from all the pressure, stress, and dread of US culture, made my mouth water. As the guys planned their surf trip, the girlfriends decided we wanted to join too. My boyfriend Noah was not too happy, but he was outnumbered. I had just quit my job at the news station and as the planning unfolded, I went a step further and decided I wanted to stay down in Central America and try to find a job teaching English. It would also be a good opportunity to catch up to my soul, which seemed to have broken away and was widening its lead on me.

I finished at the news station and moved back to my parent's house, where I would stay just a few short months before flying out to Panama for the surf trip. I had

barely arrived back home before I began packing the biggest suitcase, I could find for what my boyfriend warned was going to be a “rugged backpacking trip.” There was an emphasis on the fact that it would not be a fancy beach vacation, as if I knew anything about those. Noah and his friends were from one of the wealthiest towns in the state and from extraordinary economic advantages compared to me. Noah’s warning and suggestion that I may not be able to handle it made my eyes roll so far back I could have scraped the roof of my skull with them. Growing up poor, if there was anything I was comfortable with, it was being thinly provisioned. It infuriated me that they were suggesting I was the one who was the fragile and spoiled prissy.

I was packing my bags when my cell phone rang, and the news director’s name scrolled across the little square screen in faded black-type font. The life was sucked out of my stomach and the fog in my head rolled back in. I let the call go to voicemail.

“Hi Megan, this is Tom Goldstein calling to let you know that you are an Emmy award-winning producer. We got the call this week that a show you produced won a regional entry for Best Local Newscast, which makes you and everyone who worked on the show recipients of this prestigious award. Give me a call ...and Megan... congratulations.”

My heart raced, and my thoughts were popping off in every direction. Hearing the news director’s voice terrified me, but I couldn’t wait to tell my parents the news of the award. Still, yet another part of me didn’t really care about an Emmy because I

knew I would likely never go back to that particular hell realm. I cracked a beer to quiet the fireworks show popping off inside me and to work up the liquid courage to call him back.

I sat sipping my beer on the densely knit red carpet in one of the bedrooms I had grown up in. The room had dark paneling walls, and the beds had steel jail-bar headboards that one of my sisters had painted red and white. The mattresses still had the same mismatched comforters as when I was in high school. I was back in my small town, but I wasn't staying.

My mind ran wild, and thoughts bounced wildly between news of the Emmy and fantasies of a tropical paradise. My imagination carried me away, like when I was a child in the walnut tree. The beer was helping with the internal commotion, and I took a few more chugs. I held up each piece of clothing... a pair of cut-off jean shorts, a ratty summer dress, my first pair of brand-new designer jeans that I had just put on my first brand-new credit card. I studied each item, trying to picture myself in it, only ten pounds skinnier. Even though I had the body of an elite athlete, I always believed being thinner was somehow a crucial goal to finally feeling better. My boyfriend had told me to pack light and to bring the bare minimum. Still, I had read an article by a woman surfer about how to pack for a surf trip. She said not to listen to men and to bring as many summer dresses and swimsuits as possible. I held up the jeans again, studying them carefully, but finally sighed and set them aside. They represented the recently deflated fantasy I had tasted of a higher-status, albeit

soul-sucking life. They would also be too hot to bring. I moved on to a pile of swimsuits and dreams of finding relief.

I got the courage to call the news director back while stuffing bikinis. He answered cheerfully and congratulated me as if I was his. The feeling of belonging to the prestigious yet troubled news world was seductive and disturbing. He informed me that the Emmy was a huge deal and that an Emmy on a resume is what every large market news director would look for when hiring a producer. He said the station would receive the iconic golden statue, and anyone whose name was on the show could also get one, but they would have to pay a couple hundred dollars for it. I bit at my nails, and for a moment, I considered his words and imagined showing off the magnificent trophy to my parents' friends. This was before social media followers when impressing your parent's friends was more of a thing. My eyes blinked back a certain regret when thinking of the attention it would bring me, but then my gut clenched tighter as it remembered the pressure and dread I felt from being under the watchful critical eye of the news director. The longing to belong flared up briefly. I shivered and snapped out of it. I didn't want the statue. I returned to my escape plan. Besides, I only had about \$1,000 in my checking account. By my calculations, that would last me at least a few months in Central America. I thanked him and proudly let him know I was leaving the country.

Gretchen and I met in elementary school, instantly becoming best friends. During our first sleepover, we washed our hair with Suave brand shampoo that cost

\$1.25 a bottle and smelled like artificial strawberries. It must have served as some type of little women's initiation because, from that night on, we were joined at the hip. We held hands during car rides, made up dance routines, and wrote notes back and forth to each other daily. When we turned 18, we snuck to the big city to get little tattoos on our lower backs, as girls from small towns were known to do in the nineties.

Gretchen was a natural beauty. She was tall and lean with dark eyes and a thick head of large dark brown curls that fell below her chin and always stayed in place, bouncing with her when she laughed. She had a spark that was different than anyone I had ever met. She wasn't scared to express herself, unlike me. I remember watching her star in our school play, singing without inhibition. It made me want to break out of the thick-walled cave of constant fear of embarrassment I lived in. Everywhere we went, she got attention from boys and even older men. I felt insignificant beside her, but she didn't notice or care about boys' attention. She much preferred my attention. She would link her arm under my elbow and prop me up next to her as her equal.

Gretchen and I were very different. For as long as I knew, I felt something was wrong with me, and I thought I needed to be very careful not to be too bold with my ideas, or I would embarrass myself. In contrast, Gretchen's light was as bright as the sun but was slowly buried as time passed. Gretchen's stepdad came into the picture during elementary school and did the work of dimming her. He was a giant stoic terrifying man with steel-toed work boots and shoulders as wide as a wheelbarrow. On the outside, he was much different from my father, who, in public, acted gentle and

kind. It broke my heart to see how Gretchen's stepfather intimidated her into submission, or at least how he tried to. I didn't see myself under my father's control and thought my insecurities were personal problems. Our father figures had more in common than we realized. As the years went by, Gretchen and I turned more and more towards boys and self-medication to deal with our captivity. We drifted further and further away from each other and ourselves.

We went to different colleges, and during our undergraduate years, we continued to drift. We both managed to get our bachelor's degrees. When we finally reconnected the summer after I quit the news job, it was as if we had never been apart.

Gretchen and I reunited at the bar in our hometown, which was dimly lit and filled with taxidermy and video poker machines. One of our former classmates sat in a t-shirt and jeans at the bar, red-faced with his beer belly protruding against the bar ledge. He welcomed us warmly, as did the bartender. Not everyone in our hometown went away to college, and I felt a momentary rush of excitement at this rare opportunity to feel superior, but the locals were hardly star-struck.

"What can I get you two to drink?" The lady bartender's glossy eyes smiled through her thick black eyeliner. Gretchen looked at me,

"Want to get a bottle of wine?" These days before, I would drink multiple bottles to myself, and an entire bottle of wine seemed like a lot. Gretchen had always been so bold.

“Sure, why not?” I could loosen up, I thought as I bit at my fingernail before catching myself and then sitting on my hand.

“Excuse me, we know what we want.” She said loud enough to get the bartender’s attention again. “Do you sell wine by the bottle?”

“You want a whole bottle of wine?” She looked perplexed. Our classmate sitting next to us at the bar started to laugh, and she turned her attention toward him.

“These girls asked for a bottle of wine!

“Well, hoo-dee-doo!” He sang in a high-pitched voice with his pinky, and his nose turned to the air. They both started laughing. From across the bar, he yelled,

“Hey, Mark, these girls just ordered a bottle of wine!” Everyone within earshot was howling and laughing.

Our small farm town was surrounded by wineries selling some of the finest wines in the world, but within the city limits, you wouldn’t know it. According to locals, the wineries were run by “foreigners,” Here in town, you stuck to your roots and beer and liquor.

“Whatever you say. I’ll see what we got” The bartender crouched out of view to start digging through the dusty, crowded shelves beneath her. Music from the jukebox played country music, and loud conversations filled the bar as the bottles she was searching through clinked around below. I ran my index finger along my chin line, feeling for an imperfection to scratch at until I noticed I was doing it. Then I felt embarrassed and wondered what was taking her so damn long.

“Hey, lookie here!” She smiled as she pulled a bottle of white wine from a shelf below and held it up like a prize. She dusted it off and set it in front of us. “It even has a price tag on it. \$12”.

“We will take it” Gretchen grabbed it without hesitating. “Do you have a bucket?”

“A bucket?” the woman stared at her again, confused, as I bit again at my fingernails and tried to catch a glimpse of myself in the bar mirror.

“Yeah, an ice bucket to chill the wine in?”

“Let me see what we have.” She went back to searching through the shelves only to come up empty-handed.

“Now, I’m sorry, ladies, but we don’t have any kind of wine bucket.”

“Hey!” Our classmate stood up on his bar stool, pressed his beer belly over the counter, reached his hand over the line of sticky bottles of booze and past the ice bin, and grabbed a large plastic beer pitcher.

“What about this?” He held it up proudly.

“That will work!” Gretchen grabbed it out of his hands with a smile and handed it to the bartender, who dipped it into the ice bin.

“Alright, we are in business” She set the pitcher of ice, the dusty bottle of white wine, and two stumpy wine glasses in front of us.

Gretchen and I drank the bottle of wine, plus a couple more glasses, which were pink and were poured from a box in the fridge. By the time we left the bar, we had decided she would meet me in Central America at the end of my surf trip, and we

would live on the beach and look for whatever jobs we could find. We skipped, twirled, and swayed our way back up the wide dark streets to my parent's house, and even though we were adults, we quietly tip-toed to bed, giggling like teenagers who were trying not to get busted. Most people in our small town never left, but not us. We were getting out.

The surf trip to Panama was my first time out of the United States. I loved the long bus rides and staring out the window at the lush deep greens of the mysterious jungle-covered mountainsides. The hours of passing views would put me in a soothing trance of daydreaming about what my new life living on the beach would be like. I also loved staying in remote half-built hostels with quirky owners who drank all hours of the day. I learned I loved traveling on a shoestring, but Noah didn't seem to enjoy the dirt bagging as much as I did. He barely spoke to me the entire trip. Part of me savored all the new, unfamiliar sights and sounds, and part of me focused on maintaining a solid buzz to deal with the irritation of being ignored.

Noah focused entirely on surfing, which was not nearly as good as expected. He was always thinking about the perfect wave, and I was always thinking about the ideal future. We had access to so much experience, yet we barely had one eye open to it all. At the end of the two weeks, his friends headed back to the airport to fly home, while Noah and I stayed behind to spend our last week alone together.

Buckets of rain pounded down on the second-story tin roof of our hotel room. It was a basic beachfront room with a one-burner electric stove and a queen size bed

with a foam mattress and mismatched sheets. I didn't care about the accommodations if I could sit outside, stare at the waves, and watch for the flocks of large bright green and red tropical birds to land in the trees out front. Noah's frustration towards me intensified with the continued lack of decent surfing conditions and our nearing departure. All he wanted to do was surf, which I had no interest in at the time. His silent treatment reached a point where he would not even respond to me if I asked him a simple question. The massive rainstorm intensified, and we were trapped inside the small room in torturous silence and escalating tension as the sky fell in sheets and buckets on an angry sea just outside our door. Noah attempted to surf, but the ocean was messy and even more pissed than him. I was relieved when he left to surf because I could smoke cigarettes without being bothered or judged. I would watch him paddle out as I desperately inhaled a short-lived jolt of relief from the constant, relentless tension of waking life. It was so stormy, and the waves were huge and so blown out that he rarely made it past the break. I sat under the palm trees watching as he paddled and ducked under wave after giant close-out wave until he returned even more dissatisfied and dejected than when he left. He would walk right by me without even looking at me. One day as he was walking back to our room, something in him must have cracked because he didn't ignore me and kept walking like he had been doing. Instead, he sat down next to me, silently at first.

“I'm tired” He finally managed to speak, although his gaze remained fixed on the sea as tears began to well up in his dark brown eyes and drip down his cheekbones. I

turned towards him; strained tears were now pouring out of my eyes. I could not handle seeing a man cry. My stomach tightened, and I suddenly felt guilty, responsible, and desperate to make him feel better.

“I’m tired too,” I said, laying my head on his shoulder to soothe him. To my great relief, he leaned his head on mine.

“Are you really staying down here?” He asked as genuinely as if he had just realized what I had been telling him for months. My tears let up a little, and I lifted my head from his shoulder and paused. I shivered from the chill of the rain. It was just hitting him that we were going to be saying goodbye. I had been prepared, but he hadn’t been.

“Yes, Noah, I am really going to stay here. I have to. It is what I have to do.” He wiped the tears from his cheek and kept his gaze straight ahead.

“Noah, maybe it is best if we are just friends” I couldn’t believe my own words. He sat silently for a moment, but I could see his thick neck and the muscles on his broad back relax as he turned from a stoic ox to something softer. He finally turned his head toward me,

“Maybe you are right, babe.”

Tears welled up again in my eyes, and I buried my face in his neck. He wrapped his hands around my head and pressed his wet salty cheek to mine. His skin always smelled so good. The rain poured down, the sea raged, and the leaves of the palm trees flapped in the wet salty wind above us.

“I love you,” he said

“I love you too.”

With the pressure off, we relaxed and spent the last few days together, intertwined like we had been in the first few months after we met. I did feel like I loved him. If he had wanted to marry me and start a family, I would have dropped it all and said yes. It would have been an acceptable alternative to going at life alone, a prospect that both tempted and frightened me. Married with kids felt safe and admirable, but he wasn't ready for marriage and a family. Deep down, I think I knew marriage and kids wouldn't solve the problem I was working on. It wouldn't have satisfied my intense longing, for I didn't know what nor the restlessness inside which haunted me. I knew we would end up divorced, and if I did marry, I thought back then, I wanted it to be cosmic, soul-merging, and for infinite lifetimes. Such ideas were like a wool turtleneck on a hot day to Noah.

We wept when it was time for Noah to fly back to Oregon, and neither wanted to let go. He walked out the door, and I collapsed on the hostel bed. In his absence, I realized I had made a colossal mistake.

Chapter 2 - The Beach

My eyes were still swollen with tears when Gretchen arrived at the hostel. Noah and I had said our final goodbyes just hours earlier, and it seemed I had fallen even more deeply and hopelessly in love with him in his absence. When I heard the knock at the door, I feared I would have to tell Gretchen I had changed my mind. I wanted to go home. I wanted to be with Noah.

I opened the door, and like a tornado had swept it open, Gretchen hugged me, lifting me up and twirling me around. Her arrival instantly erased the unyielding love I had sworn I had rediscovered with Noah moments earlier.

“We did it! We are here! Let’s go to the bar and get a drink!” Her charisma unleashed me from the pressure I felt. It occurred to me I was now free, and I may have levitated with anticipation to get to the bar. Noah never liked the fact I drank and smoked. I was so excited to finally be free to numb my feelings in peace. I didn’t know being numb was ultimately the furthest thing from being free.

Gretchen made friends with just about everyone in sight the first night in the San Jose hostel. I was grateful for her extroverted nature and her head-turning beauty. I would have been comfortable sitting alone, drinking and smoking in peace.

Other young backpackers at the hostel were at various stages of their travels. Some of them, like us, were just arriving and were clean-cut, pale-skinned, and overly confident. Some travelers were at the end of their trips - tan and scruffy with a glossy-eyed sadness. Some were in the middle of various versions of around-the-world adventures and were flying out to other countries. Rookie backpackers loved to share tips and travel stories. At the same time, more seasoned travelers sat back quietly, somewhat above the trends and the same old stories that came along with them. I soaked it all in, aware of everyone, but not knowing how I fit into the mix. I washed it all down with several \$2.00 cocktails.

We shook off our hangovers with strong black coffee the next day and discussed where to go first. Gretchen said she had been researching and found a hostel advertising for volunteers to help at the front desk with the English-speaking guests. I asked her where the hostel was and to my surprise it was in the same little beach town Noah, and I had just come from. It was where Noah and I had sat under the palm trees and broken up.

“Gretchen, that little beach town. I dunno. It has a vibe. The only thing that separates these like massive waves from the mountain is a single road, and like there are just a few houses and hostels. There is nothing there but surfers. I think we should at least check it out. I want you to see it”.

“Sounds like we already have a plan.” Gretchen was easy. Both of us were comfortable with small towns and we both loved the idea of going off the beaten path.

Before heading straight back to the little beach town from where I had just come, we decided to stay a few days in a small Bohemian beach town which at the time was a sort of hidden treasure on the backpacker’s circuit. Years later, I went back to visit, and it had turned into the Beverly Hills of the coastline, but back then, it was yet to be overrun by tourists. Just a handful of open-air restaurants lined the pristine strip of coastline where gentle waves rolled toward shore. Reggae music wafted along the salty breeze and young travelers walked around barefoot, their tan shimmering skin glistening in the sun. The tropical air felt like breathing magic. I had never been around Latino men before. The first night of drinking and dancing in paradise led me straight into the arms of a young Panamanian university student on holiday with his friends. He was clean-cut, charming, and spoke excellent English. The way he gazed deeply into my eyes without looking away made me wonder if I had already found what I had been longing for. Noah and I had been very close in some ways, but I could rarely get behind his hard outer shell and access his depths, which I craved. With this young man, I found myself the one to look away first. I didn’t sleep with him, but this unfamiliar passion charmed me. We exchanged numbers, and Gretchen rolled her eyes at the fact that I already thought I had a new boyfriend.

A few days of partying was enough to give us a feel for the backpacker's scene, which we quickly learned, included a general distaste for Americans, not to be confused with people from above and below the US borders who also considered themselves Americans. US travelers had a reputation for being ignorant and entitled.

It embarrassed me and I wanted to prove we were different. Gretchen seemed unaffected; besides, she was always very well-received by almost everyone. We both agreed we wanted to differentiate ourselves from the tourist crowd, and we decided it was time to make our way to where we might find work.

Gretchen slept soundly on the bus ride, but I was too excited. My eyelids were heavy, but my thoughts kept them from falling shut over my eyes. I was always so tired and had a permanent yearning for rest, but I had trouble sleeping. After several hours of winding through the countryside and up and over the mountains, we arrived in Jaco, which was known as one of the biggest party towns in Central America and it was just over the hill to where we were headed. We were almost there, and I was giddy. Later I learned that giddiness is often my body's way of being prescient to certain types of danger, but I didn't know that at the time. We switched busses, and after another forty minutes of stopping and going to let people off, I was back in Playa Hermosa. The bus dropped us off in front of the one little grocery store, and we went in and bought beer, cigarettes, chips, bread, and jam. Neither of us knew Spanish besides the little cramming we had done. We asked the man behind the counter to ask

for directions to, The Dos Hermanos hostel, and he responded in Spanish, pointing down the road. We were shaking our heads enthusiastically as if we understood, imitating his hand gestures which left us both nodding like fools and pointing in the direction it must have been.

It was rainy season, and the few days of the sun had given way to another round of massive downpours, which began to really start to come down on our walk to find the hostel. We were dirty, wet, hungry, and tired from spending the day hungover on multiple bus rides. As we walked past the edge of town, the sky turned dark. We were surrounded by jungle on both sides and losing sight of the ocean. We started to question if we were going in the right direction, my confidence in our plans began to waver, and my heart started to race. We kept walking, mostly in silence, to avoid snapping at one another from nerves. My stomach began to clench with regret over our stupid plan. I started thinking about a cigarette, but it was too wet to stop. We kept on going and before too long, which felt like an eternity, we saw a large brightly lit sign towering ahead that said Dos Hermanos and had a surfer in the tube of a wave in the backdrop. We smiled at each other, and my thoughts of impending doom ceased, and my shoulders relaxed. We picked up our pace before turning onto a palm-covered entryway leading to the hostel reception area. An older man looked up from the desk, pushing his glasses to his eyes without smiling.

“Hello... Hola,” I said trying to sound confident.

“Buenas,” He responded in a serious tone as his eyebrows wrinkled together suspiciously. Gretchen spoke up,

“I wrote to you about work. I’m Gretchen. I wrote to you.”

His expression didn’t change, and he responded in Spanish, which neither of us understood. He noted our blank stares.

“I speak Spanish,” he said in perfect English, standing up now.

“Trabajo,” Gretchen responded, somehow finding the word for ‘work’ in her memory.

“I emailed you about working here,” she said again. Suddenly his eyes lit up,

“Ahhh, Gretshe!” Pronouncing her name with his Spanish accent this time.

“Si. I remember. Si, yo se, OK. Soy Franco. Si, come, let us sit here and talk”.

He did speak English but preferred not to.

We took our backpacks off and pulled up chairs around the heavy wooden dining table overlooking a lush garden obscured by the roaring downpour.

Franco shut and clasped the heavy wood doors to the windows, and it was suddenly quiet.

We sat down and he explained to us he needed someone to work at the reception desk, deal with the English-speaking customers, and give him English lessons in exchange for a room and \$50 a month. We asked him if we could both stay and split the work, and he said yes, that we could each work every other day or one of us could work in the morning and one in the evening. And that was it. He said he would show us to our room, but first, he wanted to introduce us to his sons, who were professional surfers and who ran the surf shop. Sons, did he say? Plural? Professional surfers, did he say?

I looked at Gretchen, and she looked back at me with a grin. He led us through the tree-fort-like jungle walkways, past brightly colored hostel rooms, and down and back to an apartment painted bright red with a heavy wood door and dripping wet vines sprawling in every direction.

He knocked on the door before opening it to where a young man who sat at a computer spun around to greet us. At first, he didn't smile, and Franco stepped out of the way to introduce us. His son, who introduced himself as Tomas, listened with his eyebrows furrowed, just like his father had when he first saw us. Franco explained to his son that we would live and work there now. He turned his attention to study us more carefully. His gaze met mine, and his face softened, and I felt my cheeks blush.

He was short, and like most surfers, he was naturally lean and muscular. He had caramel skin, dark chocolate brown eyes, and long dark eyelashes. Franco called for his other son, Benito, who appeared out of an adjoining room. He was much taller with long sun-bleached hair and light olive skin. I swallowed the lump in my throat and said hello, mucho gusto, which meant nice to meet you and was one of the few phrases I knew.

His other son was not overly friendly, but he was polite enough. Disinterested, he returned to the room he had come from, and Franco turned to show us out, and Gretchen turned to follow. With Franco and Gretchen's back to me, I went to follow, but not before Tomas looked up from the desk and winked at me. Once again, my cheeks turned hot and red, and I swung my head around and followed the others out.

Our room at the hostel was rustic and basic, but to me, it was fantastic. The mosquito nets and brightly painted walls felt like something I would have dreamed about as a child, although I don't remember ever dreaming of it. The room had two beds and a small bathroom, and the front door opened to the lush courtyard, which I had caught a glimpse of in the rain from the second-story reception area. There was a shared open-air kitchen with mosaic designs lining the cement walls. We sat at the kitchen table as the rain poured down, drinking the beers we had bought earlier, smoking cigarettes, eating chips, and laughing about how lucky we were and how easy it had been.

The next morning, when I opened the door and stepped outside, I gasped in disbelief at what greeted me. The sun had come out and lit up the enclosed garden like a tropical fantasy land. Shrubs full of brightly colored flowers and bright green banana trees decorated the walk between our room and the kitchen. A giant lizard walked casually across the rock-lined pathway, and bird song pierced the air through the constant ominous hum of the ocean, which was just a short walk through a palm grove away. I took a deep inhale and felt the light sheen of humidity already starting to soften my skin. I couldn't believe this was going to be our home. Footsteps caught my attention, and I looked up to see Tomas walking up the stairs toward the kitchen. He must have sensed me because he peeked down towards our room and when he saw me, he smiled brightly.

“Buenos Dias,” he said, and I smiled back, but before I could respond he had disappeared into the reception area. My heart raced and I realized I had held my breath for a moment. Letting out a sigh, I returned to our room to wake Gretchen and get the coffee going.

In the coming weeks, we learned the ins and outs of working at the reception desk, which basically was just how to check guests into rooms. It was low season, so only a few people checked in during our short time there.

We also learned how to rent and sell surfboards and how to sign guests up for surf lessons and we tried to surf a few times without much success. We were both used to being very busy and it took us a while to understand we could take it easy when there was nothing much to do.

We played board games and gave Franco English lessons. We studied our Spanish workbooks and checked our email on the desk computer. This was before smartphones. In the evenings, Gretchen and I would go to the one bar in town, which we learned was famous for its lady's night, when, yes, all ladies drank all night for free. Tourists and locals from the neighboring town would make the trip over the hill and fill the open-air dance floor that spilled onto the beach.

We started to get to know the other people who lived in this small coastal town. They were primarily surfers from South America who, like us, were doing whatever odd jobs they could find to be able to live there and survive. We learned that this little town didn't appeal much to the average tourist, even during the high season, because the waves and the rip currents were powerful. It wasn't a family or swimming-friendly beach. There was a bar, a little grocery store, a couple European-owned bohemian-style cafes, a handful of surf hostels, some modest local residential housing, and a couple of oceanfront real estate developments.

Gretchen quickly became bored and restless with the long quiet days at the hostel, but we had devised a plan to start a coffee shop out of the upstairs hostel kitchen. Franco was open to the idea, and Gretchen's rich grandma shipped us down a brand-new espresso machine. We planned to start our business endeavor once the tourist season picked up. In the meantime, I had developed a crossed-eyed brain-melting crush on Tomas, the eldest son who had winked at me. I was happy to work long quiet days and evenings at the hostel. I spent my days hoping for a glimpse of him or even better, a brush up against him as he walked by.

Since I loved being at the hostel and there wasn't much to do, Gretchen found another job working reception at the high-end condos down the road. She rarely slept in our room and stayed most nights with the boyfriend she had found. I met him once, and he appeared old and weathered compared to her. He was a skinny French surfer, and his eyes were bright red and sunk behind his protruding cheekbones. His dark brown hair was long and greasy. I never understood how these kinds of guys landed a girl like Gretchen.

Meanwhile, I would spend my days lost in daydreams and fantasies of Tomas and me becoming destined lovers, like a tropical version of Cinderella and Prince Charming. He sensed my interest in him and sometimes lingered to show me something irrelevant on the computer. His English was good and none of them had any patience for our attempts at speaking Spanish. There was one slight problem with

my new fairy tale dreams of happily ever after. Tomas had a girlfriend. She was taller and thinner than me with long, naturally sun-bleached hair which fell at the small of her tan string bikini-clad back. She was a perfectly gorgeous Argententia model. I didn't mind her because she always seemed quietly annoyed at Tomas, and she was always polite and seemed somewhat amused by me. She was lovely. One day I noticed she hadn't been around in a few days, and I asked Tomas where she had gone, and he said she had moved back to Argentina. My heart leaped.

“For good?” I asked, trying not to give away my elation at this news.

“What do you say,” He asked in annoyance, as he did whenever he didn't catch my English.

“When is she coming back, when is she returning?” I repeated slowly

“Never,” he said bitterly as he went back to sipping his tea out of a metal straw.

Within a couple of weeks of his girlfriend leaving, on Halloween, to my great surprise, the upstanding brothers, Tomas and Benito, dressed up in costumes, and we all went out drinking. The local bar was throwing a huge party packed with people dressed as butterflies, mermaids, ghosts, palm trees, drag queens, and everything in between. By the end of the evening, after many drinks, Tomas and I gave in to the tension building between us. Dancing turned into kissing and kissing turned into

sleeping together. After that night, I was even more mad for him and felt I wanted to spend the rest of my life living with him in this tree-fort surf bungalow paradise. I decided I would only return to the US to show off our tan glistening bodies and our perfect love. In bed, which we stole time in when the others were away, he had the passion I glimpsed in the eyes of the Panamanian, who I had all but forgotten about. Outside the bedroom, he acted like nothing was happening between us. I didn't want to scare him off with my developing feelings, so I took what I could get, and I ignored the pit in my stomach when he blew me off. One night he asked me to stay over with him. I was shocked because, in the morning, his brother and father would see me and know we were together.

This would mean we were a couple, I thought. I hesitated to accept his invitation because I had become accustomed to having a few drinks before bed and having a few drinks is what sounded the best to me.

I never considered how odd this was. My mind longed for a relationship, but my body yearned to not feel anything at all.

It is disturbing to be magnetized toward what you think you want, but that doesn't feel good. I told him I would stay the night with him, but I needed to let Gretchen know, and then I would come back. Gretchen hadn't stayed in our room in days. I entered the kitchen and poured myself a tall glass of vodka from the giant

bottle Gretchen had brought back from the neighboring town. I splashed a little bit of orange juice in it, but otherwise just chugged it down and quickly chain-smoked two cigarettes. I wanted more, and my heart raced at the pressure to return to Tomas. I didn't want to mess up my chance to stay the night with him, so I returned to our little room, brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, and headed up the stairs to his apartment. I tried to calm my racing heart. The light was off, and I crawled in next to him.

“You stink,” He stated plainly. “You have been drinking?” My heart started racing faster again.

“Gretchen and I had a drink,” I lied.

“I don't understand why you two drink too much. It is ugly. You need to stop”.

“Yes, you are right” I held my breath and felt a dagger of shame searing my gut. I caressed him softly to try to distract him from the subject. Drinking and smoking always ended up being an unsightly and inconvenient interference. Why could some people get away with it, take it, or leave it, but not me? I always felt I was getting busted.

He quickly lost track of words, and before too long he was satisfied again and drifting off. I couldn't sleep but stayed still as not to disturb him. In the morning, it

was clear that his brother and father knew about us, but they didn't say anything, and they all but ignored me. I longed for them to accept me, but they had no interest in allowing an American girl into their inner circle. I was catching on to the fact that they despised Americans more than most. They were health-conscious new-age upper-class bohemian environmentalists who were full of judgment and hate towards all different groups of people, from wealthy ignorant Americans to poor thieving Nicaraguans, as they saw it. It isn't that I don't judge, we all do, but I only saw their shiny parts. I pretended not to notice the underlying ugliness. I would obsess over the truth in some scenarios. At other times, like this, I would shut off my intuition almost entirely to get what I thought I wanted. The fact that this family had little respect or interest in me made me want their acceptance even more. Once again, these dynamics were a carbon copy of the dynamics in my family. You can run as far away as the other side of the world to get away from your troubles, but it all lives inside you, and trust me, you take it with you. They kept their distance from me, and one day when I walked up the stairs to see Camila sitting at the reception desk, my heart fell into my stomach.

“Hola Megan,” she said sweetly.

“Camila. What are you doing here? Tomas said you were never coming back?”

“Tomas is a stupid boy. I was just visiting my family”, Her command of English was more sophisticated than the rest of them. I turned away from her to hide my

horror. He hadn't told her yet. She didn't know we were together now. That was it. Once he saw she was back and he told her she would be upset, but she would move on.

"Welcome back," I said, trying to keep my voice steady as she stood up from the computer.

"Here you go," she said, signaling me to take my post at the desk.

"Thanks," I managed through a forced smile as she floated into the kitchen to make her Mate tea, a drink to share. I knew this because Tomas had shared his Mate with me on one of the lazy afternoons while she was gone. Camila was right back at home as if she had never left. I watched her as she disappeared down the stairs. My gut and heart ached in unison as she reappeared on the steps to Tomas's apartment and entered without knocking. I kept my eyes on the door. Hours went by until Tomas eventually came into the kitchen to get lunch. He avoided me until he had to get something out of the desk. I sat stone-faced with a bonfire raging inside me. He acted professionally and as if we had never touched each other.

"Excuse me, Megan, I need to get something" I didn't budge and stared coldly at him. "What is wrong with you?" he said, suggesting I was crazy.

“You know what is wrong with me.” He softened slightly and looked at me, my eyes welling up with strained tears.

“We are not going to have any problems, Megan,” and he reached around me, got what he was after, and disappeared back to his apartment.

The rest of the day, I sat at the reception desk, frozen in rage and disgust. My mind and heart were racing, and I couldn't concentrate. I bit my nails and picked at my face until it bled while staring blankly at the computer screen. By the time the workday was over, I had run to find Gretchen, who was staying in a bunk bed in the cleaning closet of the condos where she had started working. I told her what had happened, and she assured me Tomas was an asshole. We drank heavily, and I spent the night with her in the windowless closet room, which smelled of pine sol and bleach. In the morning, I woke up half-drunk and sick with the filth of smoking too many cigarettes, the sting of reality, the smell of toxic cleaning supplies, and the unashamed sounds of Gretchen and her boyfriend in the bottom bunk below me. I crawled down from the top bunk and opened the door to the punishing bright light of the morning. I decided I would walk back down to confront Tomas, and in my blinding rage, I went straight to his apartment and banged on his door. He cracked it open and peeked his head out, half asleep and shirtless.

“What the fuck!” I cried, pushing on the door.

“Megan. I am not dressed. Wait. I need to get dressed up,” he said, closing the door. I slammed my fists as it closed on me, and tears poured down my face. He returned and came out, wiping his eyes and zipping up his shorts.

“Megan, calm down. Everything is OK. This is normal. What we did is normal. It’s not a problem.”

“It is a problem!” I screamed. “How could you do this to me! Tell me, Tell me! I pleaded pathetically

“We were just having fun, Megan.”

“Fuck you! You know that isn’t how I felt. You know. Look at me. Look at me in the eyes! You know that isn’t how I feel” His eyes softened, his defensive shell cracked, and he was so small for a moment. His vulnerability repulsed me, and I quickly put it out of my mind.

“Megan, I am sorry. Megan, I have problems. I am very sorry”. His words were genuine, but nothing he said mattered. What mattered was that we could have looked perfect, and he had ruined it.

“Fuck you, fuck you,” I sobbed and stormed down the stairs and back up to the kitchen, where I ripped the espresso machine from the wall and stormed past Franco and a couple of wide-eyed guests who were sitting down for breakfast. I headed for

the beach sobbing with the espresso machine in hand. I walked by surfers, who turned their heads as they jogged barefoot on the hot sand to the water. I passed upper-class tourists in large sun hats on their morning beach walk who smiled awkwardly and said, “Hola” as if trying to be polite to a distressed local. I dug my heels in, sweating and crying as I stomped past professional surf photographers setting up their tripods. Eventually, I returned to the broom closet where Gretchen lay undisturbed in bed with her boyfriend. She barely opened her eyes to see me sitting on the floor, crying over the gourmet coffee maker before rolling back to bed. My happily ever after was over already again.

The fantasy I had created about living happily ever after and staying forever in the jungle tree house surf paradise, never having to answer the patronizing concerns of anyone back home again, was crushed. I thought I’d found what I was after, but I had been wrong. I reached out to grab the perfect image, but it was unreal.

Gretchen introduced me to the owner of the luxury condos where she had been working. He sought help turning the pool house into a bar for the guests. He was a short, stocky toe-head blond dirt bike-riding ex-pat from the Carolinas who had lived in Central America for nine years and didn't speak Spanish. He had a similar authoritarian small-man presence as the news director. Still, he was louder, more aggressive, and with a quicker temper. The four-story condos starkly contrasted with the rustic surf hostel scene I was becoming accustomed to. The modern condos towered around the gem of the property, which was a wide and sprawling crystal-clear puddle-shaped swimming pool.

The grounds were perfectly manicured with cut green grass, banana trees, hibiscus shrubs, and stone-tiled walkways. The pool deck had matching lounge chairs and umbrella-shaded tables neatly placed around the water's edge. I felt out of place. I told the hot-headed owner that I had waited tables and bar-tended for many years, and he didn't hesitate to hire me on the spot for the job. He showed me into the reception area, chilled by air conditioning and spotlessly clean. When we walked in, you could see the front desk workers stand up straighter, and you could cut their fear of him with a knife. Most of his staff were locals, but he had recently hired a young woman named Ingrid, who spoke many different languages, to help him translate his marching orders to his Spanish-speaking employees. Ingrid wasn't bothered by him,

and she spoke calmly and confidently. She helped translate and explain to the hotel manager how I had been hired to turn the pool house into a bar.

In Central America, there is no red tape. She explained that he would take me on his motorcycle to the neighboring town, buy everything we needed to open the bar that night, and send it back to me in a taxi. That is all there was to it. In the morning, I was hauling an espresso machine out, and by evening I was hauling boxes of beer and liquor. Gretchen and I printed out 'bar-opening' fliers and put them on all the guests' front doors. The distraction was good for me, but underneath, I felt the growing despair of feeling dumped. Gretchen tried to cheer me up by making me a strong drink and telling me to let loose and forget about him. It helped a little, although bouts of anguished tears would burst through. A couple of the guests showed up for a drink, and they were amused by our company and pleased with our fresh mango margaritas. The French doors of the pool house opened to the dazzling pool, which sparkled in the moonlight. It was stunning, and although we were 'the help' and technically now living in the cleaning closet, it gave me a feeling of being upper-class, which was alluring.

Gretchen and I knew how to use our youthfulness and charm to sell drinks to the lonely old rich men staying at the condos. They loved having English-speaking sounding boards to bounce back to them how impressive they sounded to themselves.

I leaned against the bar talking pointlessly with a retired judge about politics as he flipped through the local magazine, which everyone in town read. The magazine came out monthly with articles, announcements, classifieds, and commercial advertisements. He stopped in the middle of our conversation to unfold the magazine's center spread.

“Now that is a beautiful woman,” he gawked wide-eyed as he unfolded the pages across the bar, pushing his margarita out of the way to make more room.

I leaned over to look, and to my horror, it was a centerfold spread of Tomas's Argentinian model girlfriend, Camila. She wore a tiny bikini, and her oiled skin glistened beyond the page. She held boxing gloves up towards her sweet, mischievous smile. I looked over at Gretchen, my stomach curling as if I would vomit. Although she had sympathy in her eyes, she couldn't help but laugh. She covered her mouth, trying not to make another sound. I grabbed the ice scoop and stabbed it into the ice bin, clinking ice cubes into a large glass before filling it with vodka and barely a splash of orange juice. I grabbed the magazine off the bar and threw it in the trash.

“Don't ask.” I pounded my drink on the bar and stared at the lonely old man right in his face. His eyes were wide, and he looked at Gretchen, who made the signal with her hand waving back and forth across her throat to be quiet. The old man snorted in amusement, picked up his margarita, and returned to talking about himself.

Chapter 3 - Rats

Living in a windowless cleaning closet was not my idea of how our soulful adventure would turn out. I insisted to Gretchen we search for shelter elsewhere. We found a little a-frame shack for rent which we were told was one of the first structures ever built on this beach. It doubled as a lookout for early-day surfers to get a first peek out at the heavy world-class beach waves breaking at the doorstep. We didn't choose the shack for its legendary surf history; we chose it because it was dirt cheap, and we were nearly out of money. We moved on from the broom closet and now lived in a rickety old shack on top of a remodeled surf hostel. We shared the rooftop shack with giant rats who would scurry across the rafters above our beds at night. We didn't have any dishes, but we had a brand-new espresso machine heavier than the whole pile of boards we now called home.

I was heartbroken to be away from Tomas, or rather the fantasy world I had made up. I was stressed out about money. I couldn't sense my soul. Gretchen didn't seem concerned. After several days of sulking in bed, she insisted I snap out of my funk. She convinced me to come to a BBQ at her boyfriend's house that night. I didn't feel comfortable with her boyfriend, but I was lonely and sad, so I gave in and told her I would join her.

As the heat of midday took a soft turn towards sunset, Gretchen and I sat on the floor of our shack and had a few strong drinks before getting ready for the BBQ. I zoned out from caring about anything and dressed in a little summer dress, sprayed myself with the pink-tinted body spray we had picked up from the grocery store, and swept a few layers of mascara on my eyelashes. My eyes had already started turning glassy from the booze. I was numb and in a defensively rebellious mood. We walked down the dirt side street smoking cigarettes in the pink light as the sun settled toward the ocean. I felt momentary bliss settle in over me. What had I been upset about? This was paradise. We were so lucky. The BBQ smoke, laughter, and salsa music wafted towards the beach a couple blocks down the road. My nerves kicked in again, and I started to craving the next drink. When we walked around the corner, and the guys saw us, they all shouted their celebratory greetings. They howled as they raised their arms and drinks toward us, smiling and dancing. As we walked up, one of the guys came right up to me, swept me up in an instant embrace, and started twirling me around to the music. I let myself forget my worries, and I closed my eyes and smiled as this stranger pressed his cheek to mine, singing the Spanish lyrics in my ear between spins.

I could feel the defined muscles of his back and smell sweet liquor on his breath. Luis was a dazzlingly handsome surfer. He was bad news, and I knew it, but that knowledge was becoming more distant as the drinks we had before we left, the

shack started mixing with heartbreak and the endorphins of the celebratory atmosphere. Red flags and butterflies mingled, but I was too checked out to notice the difference or to even care. The temptation to drown out my pain was irresistible. I can see how some of these guys would spend their whole lives there – chasing relief. It was too easy to drown out feelings and party when the sun started to go down and the darkness crept in.

Luis scooped me into his arms and didn't let go the entire night. Drink after drink went down with the daylight as the soft jubilant afternoon turned into a dark and fragmented fog. Eventually, Luis and I ended up on the top bunk of his bed in a room he shared with three other housemates. Gretchen and some other guys went to the neighboring town to continue partying. Some stayed outside drinking until late into the early morning hours. Eventually, one of his housemates entered and passed out on the bottom bunk. Luis and I stayed up all night in the top bunk, aimlessly searching for relief, which I certainly never found. However, I felt pleased to be coldly and carelessly hooking up with someone, as if I was somehow getting revenge on Tomas.

The sun started to rise, and we were still half awake. Luis must have been lit with cocaine, and I never really slept. I was naive to the influence cocaine had on the town. Nobody ever talked about it or did it in front of me because they knew I disapproved. Later I would learn they also smoked crack when there was no cocaine to be found. As the sea birds began to caw and the gentle light of sunrise filtered in through the

dusty glass slat windows - Luis suddenly jumped out of bed, his bare feet hitting the tile floor.

“Mierda” Shit, he yelled. “I have to go to San Jose to the airport. I am picking up my manager. I have to go. I will see you tonight. We’ll have a big party with my manager. You will come”. He put on his board shorts and a t-shirt and slipped into his flip-flops as he ran out the door.

I don’t remember what I did that day after he left. I probably tried to sleep until it was time to start drinking again.

Gretchen arrived home late in the afternoon, and after she showered off the film of her night out at the bars, we sat on the floor having drinks. We laughed about how Luis and I had hooked up. We were both still a little drunk from the night before, and the drinks made us feel back to normal. We were ready to party again, and I felt giddy to see Luis and meet whoever he had picked up from the airport.

When we showed up at the party, Luis wasn’t there yet. His housemates joked about how he had taken his surfboard to get fixed. They said it had fallen over from the beds shaking when he and his “manager” had reunited earlier. My stomach wrenched. Not again. I wouldn’t be made a fool of again, and I quickly shoved down

the hurt. I was mad at myself for feeling anything toward Luis, and I got myself a stiff drink and wiped the stupid smile off my face. I wasn't going to run away. I was going to confront him. When he arrived shortly after with his manager, I was so intrigued by her I didn't confront him. I had never seen a woman like her in real life. She looked about 40 years old, which seemed quite old at the time, but her skin was smooth and flawless. Her long silky brown hair was pulled back into a perfect sleek ponytail, and her sunglasses must have cost more than anything I had ever owned. She wore mesh pants and a mesh top that showed her designer bikini underneath and just enough of her body to see it was fabulous. Her sandals were simple but undeniably expensive. I was instantly and magnetically drawn to her.

Luis greeted me cheerfully, and I rolled my eyes and brushed him off. I glued my attention to this woman who introduced herself as Stefi. I had never been so close to such a glamorous woman. We clicked right away. She was not only perfectly styled, but she was also sophisticated. It didn't take long for the guys to brag about how she was a famous real estate agent. I was mesmerized. What was she doing with these ghostly men? She told me the story of how she and Luis met. She said she was on vacation and had just finished taking surf lessons. She and her assistant ate lunch at the small bohemian cafe up the beach. While eating, she noticed an abstract painting on the wall that caught her eye. She fell in love with it and asked the owner who painted it, and

the owner said it was painted by a local surfer. She bought it on the spot and loaded it in her rental car to return to her neighboring town hotel. As she pulled out onto the highway, she saw a couple of surfers with their thumbs out. She stopped to give them a ride, and as they loaded into her car, Luis noticed his painting in the back seat. He let Stefi know that he was the one who painted it. The rest is history. She fell in love with him. She also became his art manager and got his work in top galleries in New York City. She returned to visit her lover, whom I had slept with just hours earlier.

As the evening took its inevitable turn towards dark, the boys became restless to party harder. I wanted to drink up this woman, and she was tired from traveling, so we stayed behind as the others took her rental car to the neighboring town. She was the most exciting human I had met in months, and the synapses in my brain turned back on and started firing again. I remembered I had a brain. She told me stories of traveling around the world to meet her best friend, a famous actress, on her movie sets. She told me about camel treks through deserts and flying to Paris and back on the same day. She told me how she had stumbled upon women in the Middle East who had been burned with acid by their husbands, and she wanted Oprah to do a story on it. She wasn't a writer, and she suggested I could help her with a pitch since I had experience with this kind of thing from working at the news station. She couldn't believe the torture and oppression these women endured, and she wanted to do something to help.

I agreed, and I thought she was a total badass. As I talked to her, I felt myself coming back to life. I so badly wanted to do something that mattered. Our conversation reminded me I had a brain and a soul, however distant it was. She was fascinated by my decision to forgo my shot at a prestigious journalism career to search for something that felt right. I explained to her how the news industry was corrupt and that everything in the US was about money, image, and power. I didn't mention how I couldn't cut it. My story seemed to resonate with her. She had come from old money but seemed to have the same gnawing longing for freedom. I told a story that made it seem like my life and family were humble and saintly and society was the enemy. I didn't tell her I had slept with Luis.

Stefi barely saw Luis on her weeklong trip because he and his friends were on a binge that lasted the entirety of her visit. On the last night, Luis came around, and they went off together. I remember feeling jealous, but I'm not sure toward who. I ended up having drinks at the condos with her assistant, a flamboyant gay New Yorker who wasn't nearly as impressed by me as Stefi. He wasn't interested in hanging out with white trash. I got drunk, and to make myself feel important, I confessed to her assistant how I had slept with Luis the night before she arrived. To my surprise, he didn't take it well, and he asked me to leave and told me I should have told her sooner. I never spoke to Stefi again. I heard she stayed with Luis for quite a while, but she didn't return my messages. Over the years I would look her up on her websites and

eventually on social media. I would see photos of Luis in New York galleries dressed sleek like a male Cinderella. I never had the chance to tell her what Luis did to me after she left.

Once Stefi was gone, I snapped out of my free fall and doubled down on my desire to get my life back on track. I felt so horrible and disgusting, and I stopped going out and tried to take it easy on the drinking. Gretchen continued to party hard, and I heard others say her boyfriend has started hitting her.

When I tried to talk to her about it, she denied anything was wrong and said she was happy. She would sleep all day and perk up to her charming self in the evenings. I was in denial about how serious all of this was. I stopped going out with her and was still hanging onto waning hope to make a living and a life there. I had made friends with Ingrid, the enchanting assistant from the condos, and we would spend the afternoons together drinking giant blended coffees, chain-smoking, and talking about our dreams. She was edgy, and I idolized her. She didn't go out to the bars and told me how Gretchen had gotten sucked into a terrible crowd. She said if you were going to do cocaine in this town, you needed to control yourself and keep it cool and quiet. I acted like I knew people did cocaine, even though it shocked me to have it confirmed. I wasn't part of that world and thought anything illegal was wrong.

One evening Gretchen begged me to come out just for a couple of drinks for lady's night. She said I needed to loosen up, and everyone would be out. I was lonely and getting antsy, and I gave in even though I told her I wouldn't stay out partying all night. We went to the bar, and I saw Luis for the first time since Stefi had left. He swept me into his arms like he had the first night I met him. I briefly entertained the idea of giving in, but I stopped myself. I didn't want to be the trashy girl Stefi's assistant had seen me as. I wouldn't go down that road. However, I did want to be friends. I wanted Stefi back. I stepped away from him and finally confronted him about how he was cheating on her. He laughed and told me that he and Stefi were not together, and she was just his manager, that he hadn't done anything wrong. He tried again to twirl me around, but I didn't budge, and I stepped away and told him I just wanted to be friends. He asked me to go back to my place with him where we could talk and get to know each other and work it out.

"Ha!" I scoffed at him and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right, Luis."

"Megan, just to talk. I promise. I just want to talk to you. Just you and me, talking. We can play cards and talk". It did sound nice to have some company, and maybe I could make things right with Stefi, and we could all be friends, I thought.

"Do you promise? Just talking? I don't want to do anything with you, Luis. I don't want to sleep with you."

“Megan, tranquila, I promise. Just talking”.

We left the bar and walked down the beach through the palm trees where Noah and I had broken up a couple months earlier. We walked back to the rooftop shack. As soon as I closed the door behind me, Luis pushed his body against mine and up against the wall and started kissing me.

“Luis. Stop” I moved my head side to side to avoid his face on mine. I put my arms on his and pushed, but it didn’t phase him, and the pressure of his body against mine was cement.

“Luis, I’m serious. Stop. I don’t want to do this.”

“It’s OK, it’s OK.” He pushed me steadily onto the bed.

“Stop, Luis.”

It happened so fast. I stopped talking and stared up at the wooden beam overhead. I don’t know if I moved or if I was still. I just remember staring at the rafters. Did I want this? For a moment, I wondered, but a wretched sick feeling rose up, and simultaneously I detached from it. I was awake, but I couldn’t really feel what was happening. I remember staring at the thatch roof, watching a giant rat run across the rafters. It went on and on. I don’t think I could even form thoughts to pray for it to be over. I knew something terrible was happening, but it also felt familiar to carry

on without feeling anything while horrible things were happening. Eventually, he fell asleep, and I just laid there frozen with my back to him, wide awake, until the sun started coming in through cracks in the roof. Gretchen had never come home.

Luis woke up with the sunrise. He must have thought I was asleep and tried to sneak out without saying anything. The A-frame locked from the inside, and even though I was still wide awake, I waited for him to rattle the door and curse to himself before I got up to open it with the key. His head was facing the floor. I stood there until he looked up at my face. I didn't say anything. I just looked at him in his eyes. I unlocked the door, and he put his head down and walked out.

Some part of me knew it was rape, but I didn't fully admit it to anyone or myself for a couple of years. I knew something terrible had happened but couldn't feel any emotions connected to it. When I did tell a couple of friends, I didn't feel upset about it, although the looks on their faces made me think I should have felt more upset. I didn't know how this kind of unbearable experience gets fragmented. The sensations become disconnected from the event. The pain is muffled, misplaced, and buried on top of original traumas, only to be fully felt

when we are ready to connect the dots to our original traumas and survive it all.

Chapter 4 - Downward Spiral

Gretchen and I continued working at the condos, and I sunk deeper into discomfort and despair. I put on weight. I skipped my period and worried I was pregnant. Despite the sordid situation I found myself in, I started seeing yet another surfer. Matias was from Spain and quite a bit different from the others. He was a clean and sober musician and documentary filmmaker and was bizarrely head over heels for me. I had no idea why. He convinced me we were meant to be together. I felt annoyed that he was smothering me. Still, something about him intrigued me, and his cleanliness appealed to the part of me that felt disgusted with myself. I kept insisting I couldn't date him and wouldn't tell him why. He would not let up, and to get him off my back and finally I told him I thought I was pregnant, and it had been a one-night stand with someone very bad. I didn't tell him I had been raped. I don't think I fully believed that I had been raped, and I was angry at myself for getting myself in the situation in the first place.

He knew Luis and thought he was a loser and laughed it off. He said he didn't care if I was pregnant, which didn't change how he felt about me. I was so humiliated, and Matias's acceptance felt like holy water. I started dating him, and a few weeks later, I had a period. I was so relieved the day I found out I wasn't pregnant. I told Matias I wanted to celebrate, so we got beers and sat outside on a hot late afternoon in the dirt

road listening to music. I loved how he would shut his eyes, sing, and lose himself in music.

Matias and I were enjoying each other and talking to friends as they occasionally passed by. When I looked up and saw Luis walking towards us, my stomach sank, and the sky may as well have turned black. Matias told me not to worry and to ignore him, but he wasn't passing by. He was coming towards me.

“Megan, I need to talk to you.” He said with an anguished look on his face.

“NO,” I said, trying to be tough, although my voice shook. “I do not want to talk to you.”

“Megan, I need to talk to you. It is very important, please. Matias give us a minute,” he pleaded with Matias in Spanish. I wondered if it was something about Stefi.

Matias looked to me for what to do, and I nodded, and he stood up and went inside.

“What?” I said, staring at him angrily, although I felt no strength and trembled.

“Megan, I have to ask you something. I got a call from my father today. I do not talk to my father. He called me and told me that he had a dream that I had made an

American girl pregnant”. He paused as if he had seen a ghost, frantic and haunted.

“Megan, are you pregnant?” An eerie calm passed over me.

“No, Luis. I’m not. I thought I was, but I’m not.”

“Are you sure?” He strained through his tortured and fear-stricken eyes. His father was the one who could get to him.

“I’m sure, Luis. I took a test, and I had my period. I’m not pregnant. His face did not change. He remained fear stricken.

“Luis, look me in the eyes” I knew what I wanted to say, and I saw he was vulnerable. “Don’t you ever do that to another woman again. Do you hear what I am saying to you?”

“I won’t.” He promised as if begging for mercy, although I knew his superstitious fright would be short-lived.

“Just leave, just go away.” He walked off, and I didn’t feel better. However, it was somehow, even back then, before I knew what it felt like to have ancestral patterns unwinding in my body, comforting to know his monstrous actions had registered in his father’s subconscious and on their ancestral Richter scale.

Matias returned, and I told him what had happened, leaving out that he had raped me. Matias found the story of his father's dream interesting and unsurprising and just told me to forget him.

I didn't stay much longer in Costa Rica. I moved in with Matias for a month or so, and I tried very hard to stay sober. I fought my uneasiness with everything I had. Matias didn't drink much and wasn't too fond of over-indulging. I felt ashamed of my cravings, which helped me to drink less in the short term, although it always backfired in the long run.

Meanwhile, Gretchen had moved in with her boyfriend, and a story had spread throughout the town of him locking her inside their house for days and beating her. I was sick with worry about her and felt her problems were much worse than mine. I invited her for coffee at the cottage Matias and I was renting which was a few miles inland from the beach in the country, and it set up against a hillside and had fruit trees surrounding it. It was peaceful and quiet compared to the intensity of being near the constant roar of the sea. I invited Gretchen to stay with us. I pleaded with her. She acted like nothing was wrong even though her skin was pale, and her eyes were dull and hollow. She said she was fine and made it clear she didn't want help.

Matias tried to convince me he knew he was best for me the same way I tried to persuade Gretchen that I knew what was best for her. He told me I was very special

and wasn't like others, and even though I pushed him away, I was intrigued by his kindness and what he saw in me. He seemed so sure we were destined to be together. I gave in and tried the relationship because I needed redemption and didn't have an internal compass for what felt good and what felt wrong. Matias introduced me to a bit of what is now considered new-age spirituality. He spoke of paranormal phenomena and energy. I was interested in what he had to say, but I told him clearly, I was choosing to live on Earth, which is ironic looking back since I was pretty disconnected from reality, my body, and from Earth.

He encouraged me to pursue my interest in writing, and he said he could help find me a writing job. I wanted desperately to stay in Central America, and I tried to form a new fantasy image of becoming a surf journalist, but it wasn't enough to grab onto, and I bought my plane ticket home.

My new friend Ingrid invited me to a yoga class at a studio tucked deep in the jungle down a windy dirt road past our country cottage. Since getting to know her, I learned she was part Norwegian and part Zimbabwean. She had worked as a stewardess on yachts and sailed around the world. This explained her striking presence and her ability to speak so many languages. I had taken a yoga class in college, and I thought it was strange, but anything Ingrid was interested in, I was interested in too.

When she picked me up, the sun was setting, and a soft pink glow backlit our drive down the dirt road as the low buzzing sounds of the jungle insects began their nightly ascent. Ingrid wore her long curly hair down wild with big brass hoop earrings and linen pants folded at her tiny waist. She had a soft cotton halter top showing her pierced belly button and smooth curves. I wore stretch pants and a Nike tank top and pulled my hair into a tight ponytail like when I ran track.

Arriving at the yoga studio, Ingrid blended right into the natural surroundings. I felt very American and out of place. The warm, humid outdoor open-air studio had a thick planked natural wood floor with raw polished wooden beams holding the giant palm thatch roof. It set up against the black and deep greens of the nighttime jungle. Shrubs with tropical flowers decorated the perimeter of the studio. The now sustained buzz of insects mixed with Indian instrumental music filled the warm evening air, and a light scent of incense lingered. A few students were lying on their mats with their eyes closed, and a few had just arrived and were rolling out their mats. I followed Ingrid's lead, rolled a borrowed mat out next to hers, and sat quietly cross-legged, wishing I looked less like a Nike ad. It was an image I had strived for years to perfect, and now it was all wrong. Despite the stunning setting, my thoughts were absorbed in my appearance, and wanting my appearance to be different.

A woman appeared and calmly began guiding the class once the outdoor studio was filled with students. She was much older than me, maybe in her 40s, and her calm, confident voice lured me in. I wanted to do every pose perfectly, and I wanted to impress her. At the end of the class, covered in sweat, exhausted, exhilarated, and laying on our backs in a final rest, she walked around the room with a Tibetan singing bowl. She held it above each person's chest, and as she struck the bowl gently with a mallet, it made a deep vibrating tone radiating over our pulsing hearts. How rare and strange it was. The shackles of self-consciousness loosened for a moment, and I felt something else. I wasn't sure what it was.

On the drive home, I took out my ponytail and shook my hair loose. Ingrid grinned knowingly. She could see something had shifted in me. She could see I had relaxed a little. Despite my seemingly bold choices and adventurous spirit, I was always nervous. I was yearning to break out of the cage of insecurity I lived in, and I had gotten a little tiny taste of freedom from shackles in the yoga class. I would be flying home at the end of the week, and when we got back to the cottage, Ingrid insisted we go out and celebrate.

“Tomorrow night, be at my house at 7:00 pm. I'm taking you out. You can borrow something to wear. Something sexy,” she smiled seductively.

“OK, I’m in” I felt a little seasick, but the pressure had been building to let off some steam, and I felt Ingrid knew something about this freedom I longed for.

The next night I told Matias I was going out with Ingrid, and he shook his head disapprovingly.

“Maygee, come on, you know these people,” Reminding me of the shame I had felt from Luis. My stomach tightened and I pushed the disgust back down, not knowing these feelings had weight and mass and would continue to hurt me when stored inside.

“Matias, she is nothing like them. Don’t even say that. It’s fine, Mati. It’s fine. I have been so bored. I deserve to have some fun before I leave. I won’t do anything stupid. It’s finnnne.” My craving for unmonitored drinks and relief was adding convincing charisma to my argument.

“Please be careful. I can’t stop you” He sighed deeply. “I do not like this. I do not like this at all,” he continued, shaking his head.

“Jeezus Matias, you aren’t my parent. I’m an adult. Loosen up. You are so uptight. It drives me crazy”. His disapproval made me dig my heels in even deeper.

“OK, Maygen,” His seriousness articulated by his use of my whole name.

“Do what you want, but I feel bad. I feel very bad about this”.

I rolled my eyes and ignored the aggravation nagging up at me from within. The nagging was like a child trying to get their mother’s attention by pulling on their pant leg. I didn’t know how to answer this child’s plea for help, so I ignored her.

The next evening, I had a few beers at the cottage while I got ready before riding a bike into town to Ingrid’s apartment. I didn’t recognize my excitement before going out as anxiety and the drinks calmed me. When I got to Ingrid’s, she had on sultry Brazilian music and poured us each a glass of white wine, which was a rare treat there since wine was expensive and hard to come by. I had been craving another drink since I left the cottage, and when the cool crisp sweetness touched my lips, my chest and shoulders relaxed. I thought again about how lucky we were to be in paradise. We looked through her closet and found a short tight little dress I usually would have never had the courage to wear.

“Come on, Megan. You are hot. You need to let loose. Show your body,” she said with a huge grin as she swayed and sang to the music. How I wish I could sing along to Brazilian music, I thought.

“OK, I’ll wear it,” I gave in, letting caution to the wind. We smoked cigarettes and drank wine until a few of her friends arrived to pick us up.

“Ready for a wild night?” “She threw her head back and laughed

“Where are we going?” I asked, trying not to sound worried.

“Megan, relaxxxx,” she grinned.

We drove to the next town and pulled into the parking lot of an unmarked building with a tall, thick man dressed in all black standing at the door.

“Is this a strip club?” I asked wide-eyed.

“Come on, you will like it!” she said as we piled out of the car towards the stoic security guard.

He asked for our IDs, and to Ingrid’s surprise, he wouldn’t let us in. She briefly argued with him in Spanish before telling him off and signaling us back to the car.

“What happened? Why wouldn’t he let us in?” I asked as if I were disappointed, although I was deeply relieved.

“They think we are cops,” she said commandingly.

“Fucking stupid. That is FUCKED UP. Never mind. Let’s go to another bar”.

Please, Lord, let it not be a strip club, I silently prayed. As the drinks wore off, an unsettling feeling crept back in.

I felt the need to go home, to curl up under a blanket in the fetal position, but there was no turning back.

We got to the next club, which quickly filled up with every type of person. Tourists, ex-pats, locals, young men, older women, surfers, and businessmen. The noise, the fog machine, the flashing laser beams, the crowds, and the heat started to overwhelm me. I had never liked going out, and the techno scene was nauseating. I ordered a drink, and Ingrid told me to come with her. She had a surprise.

I followed her into the bathroom, and she ushered me into one of the stalls and closed the door. She opened her hidden hip pack and pulled out a rolled-up dollar bill and a little plastic baggy of white powder.

My heart stopped. I had never seen cocaine before.

“Ingrid, I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“My dear, trust me. I will take care of you. We will just do a little. It will be so nice. Nothing bad will happen. You will just feel so nice”.

“Do you promise nothing bad will happen?” I felt terrible and wasn’t sure how I would carry on the way I felt.

“I promise,” she said as she poured lines directly onto the dirty toilet seat and inhaled one for herself before handing the dollar bill over to me. I don’t know how I knew what to do, but I did it.

The rest of the night was a blur. I remember dancing and not wanting it to end, but also never completely shaking the yucky feeling I started the night with, but rather distancing myself further from it. I remember Ingrid telling me to take it easy on the drinking.

We did more cocaine and stayed dancing until our group of friends was ready to go back to a house on the beach and party more. As we walked outside, I was shocked by the blinding sun. I had no idea it was already morning, and as my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw kids and families out walking on the street. My eyes were burning, and I could barely walk straight.

“Hold it together, Megan. You are OK,” Ingrid assured me as we made our way to a large beach-front house where the owner was pouring drinks from a full bar. He made me a cocktail, and I wandered to the water, where the hot sun was now beating down. I couldn’t stand up and kept falling into the water. Ingrid realized it was time to take me home and got me into her car, and we drove back to her house. When we pulled into the driveway, Matias was waiting for me like a mad parent. I was too sick to care.

When I got out, and he saw me, his disappointment turned towards Ingrid, and he shot daggers at her with his eyes.

“Come on he said. I’m taking you home”. I was barely able to stand, and he drove me back to the cottage and put me in the cold shower shaking his head in disappointment the whole time. I slept most of the day and night, and when I woke up the next morning, I apologized profusely and felt the guilt, shame, and sickness in my belly spreading to my whole body. It also felt as if there was a knife deep in the center of my pounding head. I wanted to die. I started to cry and begged Matias to forgive me, which he quickly did. We went to the beach to swim, and I had never felt so horrible. I felt like a heavy piece of trash that should be thrown out. I waded in the water until I could float on my back and prayed the ocean would take me away. Suddenly I felt my words were being taken seriously, and I popped my head up to see that I was being quickly pulled out to sea. This stretch of beach was known for its rip currents, and there was a story of a group of students drowning in this exact spot. It flashed through my mind. I started to panic and yelled for Matias.

He had already noticed me and was waist-deep running into the water towards me, but I was so far away from him. I started to try to swim, but I didn’t go anywhere, and my body had no energy anyways. I began swallowing water and flapped my arms to keep my head above water. I wanted to give up, and just before I thought I would go under, Matias reached his arm around my neck and held me above water. He had

spent most of his life in the ocean and did not panic. Even with his natural fitness, I could feel his adrenaline had kicked in, and the strength was something I had never felt before and had never felt since. He said nothing but held me around my neck firmly and eventually pulled us onto the shore. We were both breathing so hard that we collapsed onto our towels, and I started to cry.

“Never do this to me again,” He had snapped. He finally realized how bad I was.

“I won’t,” I whimpered.

Despite everything that was happening, I did not want to leave Costa Rica. I didn’t want to go home. I wanted to stay far away from home more than ever, but I had to get myself straight and shake off the filth. I needed to reset. I needed to escape everyone and everything in this town and clear my mind before trying again to get away again. They say you can’t run from yourself, which I now understand, but these sayings mean nothing when you are smack in the middle of it all. Matias was distraught to see me go. I was also distraught, but I already felt far away from him.

I said goodbye to Ingrid, but our farewell was cast over by shadows. She was bummed that I felt so bad after partying and had such a painful experience.

It surprised her and scared her a little how far away I had gone that night out, but she didn’t feel any moral conflict. She was unapologetic, which had always been

comforting to me since I was constantly tortured by nervousness and fear. We sat on her front porch and shared our last cigarette together. Neither of us fit it in anywhere. Both of us were seeking something that didn't hurt so much. I vowed to return, and she sighed and shook her head, gazing out towards the ocean.

Chapter 5 - Black-Outs

I spent the next few years following my return from Playa Hermosa plotting how I could make it work to return to and make a living in Central America permanently. I knew I had to learn Spanish, so I saved some money waiting tables and decided to spend a few months devoted entirely to studying Spanish in a Guatemalan city where I wouldn't be distracted by the temptations of beach life. I still couldn't quite understand that my troubles lived within me and traveled with me wherever I went.

I only lasted a few weeks in the big cold city, which sat high in the Guatemalan highlands. I was staying with a darling young family, but I had constant food sickness and felt myself collapsing into my craving for warmth and to be able to drink without self-restraint. I decided to leave and headed to a Nicaraguan beach town to study Spanish at the next cheapest Spanish school I could find. One of the first nights after arriving, I went to the beach to a concert, which turned into a huge party, and I fell for one of the drummers – the pattern repeating. I abandoned my plans to study and traveled around with the band until my money ran out. I again had to return home in no better shape and with barely more Spanish than before. I continued to wait tables and held on willfully to my plan to return to Playa Hermosa someday. Living in the United States felt all wrong. It felt like a treadmill -too fast but going nowhere. I drank heavily while telling myself all the problems were out in our broken society.

I was waiting tables full-time but had kept in touch with some of the news crew, who still had a reputation for partying. The ambitious young journalists came from all over the country. They would stick together to make the most of their time in the conservative city before working up the ranks and on to bigger and better markets. The young woman who had taken over my position as assistant producer was among the crew of dreamy-eyed young professionals who had come out to party. She was intelligent, blond, beautiful, and lived with her boyfriend, with whom she had been together for several years. She was fascinated by my story of leaving the country to travel and explore an alternative way of life. She admitted she was jealous, which caught me a little off guard. I was nearly penniless, drinking heavily and without any real direction or meaningful relationships. Her eyes were wide and watery, and she confessed she couldn't see herself getting married. She also agreed with me that the news industry was too stressful. I could sense something stirring inside her like it had me.

A few weeks later, I learned she had left her boyfriend and quit the news station. I couldn't believe it. Part of me felt jealous that she might do it better than me, and part of me cringed at the thought I might have fooled her. She envied me, but hadn't I deceived her? Maybe I wanted everything I ran from. Perhaps I wanted the elevated social status, the money, the husband? Maybe I was a fraud who was good at telling

stories to make myself sound better than I was? Part of me had been on a genuine and soulful quest, but my body ached, and my mind questioned everything.

Not long after her departure, the news crew and the young woman's newly single ex-boyfriend showed up at the bar of the restaurant where I worked. They encouraged me to come out with them to celebrate one of the young reporters' birthdays. When I was off my shift, I changed from my wrinkled and marinara-stained white button-up shirt into a clean tank top and took my place up at the bar. I ordered my shift drink, which the bartenders made very strong for us servers. I downed it and ordered another one as I kept up with the chatter and excitement of the girls before getting up to use the bathroom. As I stood up, I noticed Ty, the boyfriend who had just been dumped by the lovely blonde, walking towards me with a relaxed grin. A feeling of dread started to creep up, and I lowered my head and turned my shoulders back toward the drink. I don't remember anything else about the night out.

The next morning, I woke up on a carpeted living room floor next to Ty.

"Well, hello, beautiful," he said with the same grin I had seen the night before. It took me a few minutes to figure out where I was and who he was.

"I feel sick," I said, rubbing my eyes and sitting up as the room spun around me.

"That was a wild night," he said, laughing.

“I don’t remember anything,” I confessed plainly as I tried to orient myself to what was happening. My whole body ached, my head pounded, my mouth was dry and hot, and a familiar feeling of pain and disgust rose within me.

“I’m going to be sick” I rolled back down and covered my eyes with my hands.

“Ahh, sweetheart. I’ll get you home. Mmmm mmmm,” he said, stroking my hair and putting his cheek next to mine.

Instead of running in the other direction from a man who I initially dreaded and who seemed to be undisturbed by sleeping with women who were blacked out, I felt an attachment to him. It didn’t occur to me that what he had done was any worse than what I had done. For all I knew, I carried on like normal when I blacked out. I had no idea what he experienced, but I knew I woke up in pain and deeply disgusted with myself. I felt horrible, so when Ty called me and still wanted me, I didn’t run in the other direction because it felt like a great relief to still be wanted. This is how poorly I felt about myself inside. His ex-girlfriend was so smart and pretty, so maybe I wasn’t so bad, and perhaps he wasn’t so bad. The friends surrounding me saw the way we hooked up as normal for young people, which it was not. I now see how it reflects a deeply disturbing pattern of disassociation, originating in childhood, where the blueprints of many of our unconscious patterns have been laid.

Ty and I dated for several months, and before I knew it, I felt I was falling in love with him too. Pain and pleasure were all mixed up. Shame and attachment were indistinguishable. Dread and giddiness were intertwined. The butterflies in my stomach were not gentle floating cupid-arrow-yielding monarchs but giant gut-gnawing moths. I figured the disgust I felt was because I was disgusting. I created a new image with him of happily ever after to make me feel better and make everything seem clean and pretty. When he broke up with me, I was devastated. My sense of worth teetered on the approval of unwell men, and I sunk further and further down the dark spiral. The day after Ty broke up with me, I sat alone on the front porch of my apartment, staring out at the blacktop and smoking cigarettes. I drank two bottles of wine before the sun went down. I drank until it didn't hurt anymore and until I could sleep.

I was entering my late twenties when I accepted that I would not be able to return to Costa Rica. I didn't blame it on my drinking habits. Still, instead, my pendulum swung between self-pity for how harsh and unfair life had been to me and self-loathing for how ugly and disgusting I was. Among other wrong beliefs, I thought life was cruel and that I needed to be better. I started volunteering at several different organizations and started to build my resume back up to try to get into graduate school. I decided I would become a social worker or therapist or something respectable and decent. I let all my sensational fantasies and soulful dreams go and

wrote myself into a story of becoming a humble servant of social good. I didn't realize this was just another ego survival story born from the lie that I was terrible in the first place. My will to fix and control my destiny became stronger with each disappointment.

I decided I wanted to become a speech therapist. Although I heard that graduate school was highly competitive, when I made up my mind about something, nothing stopped me. I did well on the entrance exams, crafted a decent resume and essay, and was accepted.

I decided to visit the campus and meet with an adviser before deciding if I was going to take the plunge and take out the absurd amount of loans needed for what I saw as a massive leap forward. It seemed the only way to get out of the dark spiral of partying I had been on. The government had just started a program that claimed to pay off all student loans after ten years of public service. I planned to take advantage of that program and wouldn't let income disparity hold me back. However, it was hard not to be paralyzed by fear when considering the price tag.

When I arrived on campus and found the office of the woman I was scheduled to meet with, I was taken aback by the luxury I felt walking through the heavy glass doors. It was a brand-new building with a floor-to-ceiling glass entryway with a large abstract sculpture hanging down three floors to dangle above the lobby's huge gas-lit

fireplace. Freshly upholstered chairs and couches formed a neat square seating area around the flames that danced quietly behind the clean clear glass fireplace doors. There was a coffee shop, and the wide floating stairs wound up three floors with views of well-manicured tree-filled campus courtyards on all sides. It smelled like espresso and new things. I felt a wave of sophistication wash over me like a baptism. Could this really be my life? Could this be me studying at this fancy school? This is what would redeem me. I would forget about the last few years and live a decent life. I would prove I was good.

I took a few deep breaths before knocking on the wide gray door of Dr. Teresa Coleman. She could sense my nerves. Speech therapists weren't exactly a laid-back group of folks. She was used to the nervous, uptight, overachiever type and spoke in a friendly, calm voice.

“So, you are interested in speech therapy. You are very smart and have made a great choice. It is a wonderful profession. You are going to love it.” She said with a gentle smile.

I couldn't believe she was saying she wanted me there even though I had already been accepted. I thought she would see through me and change her mind once she met me.

“I'm worried about taking out loans. Do you think it is worth it?”

“Speech therapists are happy with their jobs; they don’t leave their jobs” She also sensed I was a bit unconventional and added, “Even if you want to spend the summers writing a book or learning a language, you can do all that and work in a school.” Sold. She was good at reading people.

“This is a big school, and it is a rigorous program. You will be a small fish in a big sea and have to work harder than you have ever worked.”

“Yes, Dr. Coleman. I understand” I will show everyone.

I visited with her a bit longer before deciding I would accept. It would take me three years and over \$80,000 in loans, but I would do it. I imagined myself working at a school making \$60,000 a year and having plenty of money to travel and write in the summers. I would live a very decent and respectable life, and I would make a difference. I would find my soul and prove that I was good. On the drive home, I was buzzing with excitement. I couldn’t wait to pop open a bottle of white wine to celebrate and calm down.

Chapter 6 - Crashing

Returning to graduate school in my thirties suited me well. I enjoyed the energy of being on campus, and the coursework was surprisingly easy for me. I still felt constantly stressed out. I addressed it with multiple cups of coffee to wake up in the morning, extreme exercise, and alcohol to calm down at night. It was an exhausting yet socially acceptable cycle. If you slow down, you will be forgotten and may as well not exist. I kept up the pace but started getting excruciating stomach aches, worsening by the month. One night after a long grueling bike ride, I had dinner and was sitting out on the front porch having a beer, staring out into the street, lost in thought, when my stomach started screaming at me.

It ached sharply, and when I stood up, the pain was so dizzying I had to go into the bathroom and throw up. I tried to lie down, but the pain wouldn't let me rest. I wondered if it was my appendix. After an hour of intense and relentless pain, I decided to drive myself down to the university district emergency room and get it checked out. It was nighttime, and when I arrived at the ER entrance, the man in front of me checking in at the front desk appeared to have come in from the streets.

"I can't breathe," he said in a low gravelly whisper, pulling the wool blanket he had wrapped around him tighter.

“You can breathe because you are talking,” The receptionist said in a loud, straightforward, matter-of-fact voice.

“What seems to be the problem?”

I waited as she reluctantly checked him in, and when it was my turn, I felt I needed to exaggerate my symptoms even more.

I started to cry like I would when I was a child trying to get out of going to school. I said, “My stomach is hurting very badly. I am scared.”

“Ok, fill this out, sit over there, and wait for your name to be called.”

I wondered if I was imagining the pain and started questioning my decision. My stomach hurt, but suddenly I felt embarrassed and as if I wouldn't be believed.

I was called back to sit in an exam room. I sat on the cold vinyl table with the thin tissue covering it, which would rustle and startle me whenever I shifted my weight. I tried to stay still and ran my finger along my jawline to find an imperfection to scratch at to calm down. Eventually, a nurse came in and took my vital signs, and forty-five minutes later, a middle-aged doctor knocked on the door. He looked like he had lifted weights. His arms were thick, and his biceps filled his short sleeve scrubs, but his skin was pale, and his eyes bloodshot. The deep wrinkles on his forehead made him look worn down.

“What seems to be the problem?” He asked with an annoyed exhale, looking down at his chart.

“My stomach hurts really bad” I strained as if I had to convince him of the pain with my voice.

He didn’t look up.

“Mm hmmm “He kept his head down as he asked several questions about my health history. My health history was, as of yet, unremarkable. When we got to the question about drinking, I told him I had a few drinks most days and more on other days.

He looked up from his survey disapprovingly.

“Did you drink today?”

“Well, I had a beer. I went for a really long bike ride, like 30 miles, and I had a beer when I got home”. I said nervously, as if I was about to get in trouble.

“And why did you feel the need to have a beer after such a long bike ride?”

“I don’t know,” I said, ashamed.

“I am not finding anything wrong with you. I recommend you take a Tums and lay off the alcohol. There is no reason you should be having a drink on a weeknight after exercise like that.”

“OK” Atomic shame began to rise, and I pushed it down. I just wanted to get out of there and get home.

I drove home, and the acute pain in my stomach became diffuse whole-body shame by morning. I didn't have a stomachache anymore and wondered if I had imagined it again. I promised myself I'd quit drinking. I would join the YMCA and start taking yoga classes, and I would be better. I would be good.

I met Sara near the beginning of graduate school. We were chatting between classes, and we discovered our shared love of biking. She was ten years younger than me, and I was flattered to be chosen and befriended by one of the cool young kids. At thirty years old, I was a non-traditional student, and her acceptance of me made me feel less insecure about my age. She was from Colorado, and her long wavy blonde hair always looked perfectly windblown. She was alarmingly thin but looked healthy with tanned, lean muscles and a laid-back hippie style. She wore her river sandals and jean shorts while biking, but like me, she was hardcore when it came to extreme exercise.

Sara would always say yes to the craziest adventure we could come up with. Our friendship was defined by our insatiable mutual need to push our physical limits and the limits on what adventures were possible while grinding away at graduate school full-time. Sara came across as shy and quiet, but she had a plan for her life, which nothing and nobody would interfere with. Career by 25, married by 28, kids by 30. I thought of us as empowered, fearless, and free-spirited women. The big difference between her and me was that I always tried to get to the root of my stress, but she seemed to accept it as a fact of life and did not think it was something you go around talking about. I didn't know the cause of stress and addiction almost always had roots in childhood trauma and that most people feared the emotional underpinning of connecting their pain and anxiety to their childhood. Nobody ever told me anything about trauma, and my naive probing seemed to make others uncomfortable. I didn't realize many people know about their childhood trauma, and they choose not to talk about it. I understand why people don't talk about these things now, and I can respect it, but I still can't fully relate. I guess I'm not wired to keep things buried. It just isn't in my nature.

When it came to stress, my quest for answers was logical. I studied neuroanatomy and knew nothing was wrong with my cognition, so it couldn't be a "mental" problem. I was intelligent, had good problem-solving skills, good memory, and was very ambitious. I could manage my time and had an optimistic attitude toward life. I

didn't think I was attractive and needed to lose weight, which I thought was the problem with my romantic relationships, but why couldn't I deal with stress? Something wasn't right in me, or it wasn't right with the world. Whatever it was, I couldn't put my finger on it, and nobody else seemed to have the answers either.

It was the end of spring term, and academically I was doing well. I started practicing yoga regularly, and my search for answers intensified. I did my best to keep the drinking to a minimum and would stretch my willpower like a rubber band as far as I could to get what I needed to get done.

When finals were over, and the sun had come out again, one of our classmates was throwing a party, and everyone from our cohort was going. We were all overly pressurized and ready to release the steam valve. Sara and I decided to go for a long bike ride in before the evening of drinking. Sara always liked to drink on an empty stomach because she felt she could get a buzz faster and for fewer calories. After a long bike ride, I always wanted to drink because it calmed me down. We told ourselves we were healthy.

The day was hot, and the ride took longer than we thought, so by the time we got home, it was time to shower and head to the party. We didn't eat anything, and our eyes were already glassy with runner's high when we arrived at the backyard gathering. The hostess had told me that one of her friends she wanted me to meet would be

there. I was always giddy at the thought of being rescued by a prince charming, and I couldn't wait to have a drink to calm my nerves. I cracked a beer and was already fading in and out by the end of just one drink.

Lawn chairs were spread out around the yard, and groups of people were huddled around, talking loudly over the music, laughing with their drinks in hand, coming and going from the kitchen where the food was. I sat back, melting into a chair away from the noise. The hostess introduced me to her friend, a handsome and painfully shy artist with long brown hair and a beard. He made me think of what I imagine Jesus to look like. He sat beside me, probably relieved to be also away from everyone. I was drunk and emboldened, and I tried talking to him about everything imaginable, but the conversation was like pulling teeth. We both continued to drink heavily and eventually, he loosened up enough to start talking. Once the floodgates were open, it didn't take long before the talking turned into flirting. As the sun went down, we were making out in the dark but still within view of anyone who cared to notice. Most of the guests had continued to the bars, and Luke and I eagerly tried to figure out where to go to be alone. We had both ridden our bikes to the party, but I insisted I was too drunk to ride and needed to stay there. I suggested maybe we could sleep on the floor inside.

“Come on, let's just ride. Your place is so close. We can make it”. He urged like a starving teenager.

I gave in. I remember him riding ahead of me on the quiet, dark street, and I picked up speed and started making wide looping swerves back and forth, gliding through space. I remember feeling as if I was cruising peacefully to a tune in my head before a sudden flash and explosive impact and everything went black. It felt as if I had been crushed by heavy machinery, and without knowing what had happened, I knew I had been hit and that it was horrible. I sat up and looked down at my hands, which were filling up with a thick stream of blood coming from my head. I started to spin up and away from my body. Thoughts of my mom and my dad quickly passed through my mind, and I let them go. In the exact split second, the stress and pressure of graduate school followed, and I let those thoughts go. As I released the thoughts, all the tension and pain I had been holding onto was released, and an all-encompassing sense of relief and bliss enveloped me. It was the relief I had been longing for all my life, but it was short-lived and all too suddenly, I felt something tugging me, and then I realized someone was putting pressure on my head. I re-entered my body's pain and tight constriction and started fighting. I did not want to come back. I would later learn; I had somehow slid headfirst into the trailer hitch of a parked truck. A nurse, who was just getting off her night shift, was trying to put a rag against my head. She happened to have a pile of sterile rags on her front seat. I pushed her away, but the pain and pressure intensified. I blacked out again, but this time there was nothing, no bliss, no memory, no nothing. It wasn't until I was in the ER again, staring at another unimpressed tired, worn-down middle-aged doctor, that I

was conscious again. He had already stitched up my head and asked if I wanted him to call the plastic surgeon because the laceration had gone down to my skull and would leave an impressive scar if left to heal without surgery. I adamantly refused the plastic surgeon. I didn't care how I looked. It suddenly seemed like such a frivolous consideration. I had almost died. I was alive, and even though I wasn't sure I wanted to be alive, appearance seemed a ridiculous matter to consider. He asked me a series of questions.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three,” I answered correctly.

“How about now?”

“Two” again, correct.

“When were you born?”

“May 19, 1980”

“How old are you?”

“I'm 29.”

“What is your friend's name?” I looked over at the young man sitting wide-eyed in the corner with a blood-soaked beanie in his hand.

“Umm, it’s not that I forgot his name, it’s just that uh, it’s just that we just met and. “Luke,” he responded.

“Luke,” I repeated, wishing I could crawl into a hole and never come out.

The doctor was not amused and said I didn’t have a concussion and that he was done. I asked if I could use the bathroom, and he pointed me to the adjoining restroom. I gasped in horror when I flipped on the light to look in the mirror. My face was covered in caked black and red blood, and my eyes and forehead swelled to larger than seemed containable. The doctor hadn’t bothered to clean off my face nor warn me of what I would see when I looked in the mirror. I don’t remember anything else until being back in my bed at my apartment. These times when I was blacked out but kept moving about in the world were eerie and unnerving, but since there were no mental images, there was no mental chatter about what happened. The only disturbance was the lingering pain afterward.

The next day, looking in the mirror was no less shocking. The bloody and pus-oozing gash extended from a chunk taken out of my eyebrow to the top of my forehead. I had two black eyes that had now nearly swollen shut and my entire face was black and blue and swollen to the point that it looked like it could burst. I had a gash on my cheek, where I chipped a bone, and my entire face was shades of black and purple. I took ibuprofen and returned to bed where Luke stayed with me for a

couple of days, shell-shocked and guilt-stricken nursing me back to health. He would make my smoothies with fresh fruit and vegetables and pick up takeout to eat. I never blamed these men for what happened when they became tangled up with me while I was blacked out. It certainly didn't say much about them, but I wouldn't know how conscious they were either, so blaming them doesn't make sense. I didn't blame anyone but myself, which also proved unhelpful. In those early days of recovering from my injuries, I was in and out of sleep. After a few more days, I decided I had to face reality again. It felt awful. Reality felt more painful than ever. I didn't want to be back. I had gotten away for a moment, and I was grateful to be alive, but the experience of bliss was confusing. I was burdened by the dread of having become acutely aware of another possible way of feeling and aware of how stressful and constrictive life felt to me. I called my family and told them a lie about how I crashed my bike on a bike ride with Sara. I insisted they stay away. I always felt defensive about letting my family know I was hurting inside. It felt like admitting pain was the same as surrendering an injured goat to the wolves.

After about a week, I wasn't feeling better, and the wound seemed to worsen. I finally decided I needed to go back to the doctor and get it checked. Luke drove me to the health clinic, and even though it had been about a week since the accident when I walked in, the front desk attendant rushed over to me as if I had just been in an accident. Once I explained that it had been a week, the color slowly returned to her

face, and she put me on the list to see the doctor. I was prescribed Vicodin, which ended up being what I needed to rest and start healing. The wound healed enough for me to talk to my professors, who insisted they would work with me as I recovered, which they didn't. It always felt like full steam ahead. I still managed to ace all my midterms. I remember telling a friend I was depressed because I felt like I should be grateful to be alive, but it felt like coming back into pain. She understood.

The accident slowed my drinking down a bit, but not completely. There seemed to be more to numb now than ever, but I feared blacking out. Sara and I decided to ride 100 miles in one day as soon as I was better to "get me back on the horse". About two months after my accident, we rode from sunup to sundown 126 miles in one day. Nobody ever told me it is extremely rare to become dependent on substances without underlying childhood trauma. I don't know if I would have listened, but I feel sad for that part of me inside that needed care and nurturing. She didn't need starvation, booze, and extreme exercise.

Chapter 7 - Digging

After the bike accident, I slowly recovered and graduated with a master's degree. I got a job, which was considered an excellent position at the time, working for a special education agency. The job boasted a desirable insurance and retirement plan, a flexible schedule, and a work environment with minimal turnover due to what I assumed was job satisfaction. I felt honored to accept the job.

Once again, I had arrived at a place that should have felt like cruising altitude. I had a good job. I found the perfect little bohemian cottage in a hip part of town. I bonded quickly with my new colleagues and continued my regular yoga practice. I had given up on writing and finding a unique sense of purpose and swung back towards wanting to settle into a comfortable life and decent social status.

I was determined to quit drinking and smoking, even though it was still the most tempting pastime, because it was the only way I knew how to settle down when feeling stressed. I found my job very stressful. The families I worked with were in dire straits, the children were severely impacted by myriad issues, and there didn't seem to be enough support. The preschools were understaffed and underfunded, the daycares were eerie, and the services thinnest where the need was greatest. I dreaded each day but felt the work was essential, and I felt my co-workers were some of the best-hearted human beings I had ever met.

One of my officemates was training for a triathlon with an organized group that raised money for cancer survivors. She asked me if I wanted to join their team. It occurred to me that this was the perfect opportunity to come clean about my struggle with smoking and make a public vow to quit. I could blog about my experience to help raise money and leave this aggravating aspect of my life behind me.

I enjoyed the triathlon fundraiser, and it wasn't too difficult for me to go without drinking and smoking during the training because I was holding myself accountable in a highly motivating way.

Sleep didn't come easy, and I tried every natural sleeping pill. I tried different kinds of tea. I tried going to bed early. I tried going to bed late. Mostly I tossed and turned. Nighttime was agonizing, but it was not hard for me to refuse a drink. I had set a goal and created a stunt, and I knew how to apply my atomic will to see it through.

One evening after a long, challenging triathlon workout, my side started to hurt. It wasn't my stomach, but it felt like a side stitch or maybe my ovary. I drank a ton of water and took ibuprofen, but the pain worsened. Hours passed, and I couldn't bear it anymore, so I went to urgent care. The doctor asked me the usual questions about my health history, except this time, I could proudly declare I had quit drinking and smoking. He took my pain seriously and ordered an ultrasound to rule out my

appendix and to see if it could be an ovarian cyst. As the doctor confirmed the pain, I became increasingly sure it was a giant tumor. The pain was concentrated and intense. He said the ultrasound was urgent, and I needed to drive straight to the hospital.

On the drive to the hospital, I clenched my jaw and bit my nails, lost in worry. What if I was sick? What if it was cancer? I would have to call my family.

I checked myself in, and as I sat in the waiting room. I picked at my face until it bled, and I had to go to the restroom to get a tissue and frantically try to hide what I had done. When the ultrasound tech called me back, she explained how she would put some gel on my belly, which would be a little cool. She showed me the imaging device, said I would feel gentle pressure, and asked me if I had any questions. I felt tense but had no questions and was laid back, forgetting to breathe. As the imagining wand touched my stomach, I flinched and started to cry.

“Are you in pain?” she asked, a bit startled.

“Yes,” I started to cry.

“This shouldn’t hurt” As she pushed the device from side to side, I felt exposed and as if she was pressing into a tender bruise, and I sobbed.

“I’m sorry you are in so much pain,” she said sincerely.

“What do you think it is?” I cried as she continued moving the device around my stomach. I was queasy and wanted to curl under a stack of blankets in my own bed.

“We will send the results to the doctor immediately, and he will call you tonight since it was an emergency order. I can tell you it is not your appendix right now, so you don’t have to stay here. There. We are all done.”

I dressed, checked out, and was relieved to be in my car, but I was sure it was a tumor. The doctor called, and my heart raced, although it would be a great relief to finally know what was wrong and take care of it.

“Is this Megan?” A man’s voice asked calmly and cheerfully

“Yes, this is Megan”

“We got the results back and didn’t find anything. Everything looked really good”.

“Oh. OK. Well, that is good news, but doctor, what is it? What is the pain?”

“The imaging did not find anything concerning. I can’t say we know what it is.

If the pain doesn’t go away, I want you to come back and see us.”

“OK, thank you.” I hung up the phone and pulled the car over. I wasn’t sure if I felt the pain anymore. What was this pain? It seemed like a ghost.

I continued my triathlon training and did well in the competition. I met my fundraising goal, and my stomach sometimes hurt, but I just tried to ignore it and tell myself it was nothing. I could not wait to crack a beer the day after the final race. I was going to try to keep my promise to myself to quit smoking, but I made no promises about drinking. I bought a six-pack of local microbrew and sat on the back porch in the shade of my flower-filled backyard. I cracked the cold bottle of long-awaited relief, and as the sweet nectary hops touched my tongue, I finally relaxed. I drank it and felt like I had returned to paradise. What could be wrong with this feeling? What was I thinking, punishing myself by quitting? I had another one, and the bliss wore off and morphed into a dull darkness, which required more drinks to ward off. I drank until I could sleep, and the next day, I had to sleep all day again from the hangover.

It seemed so unfair. When I wasn't drinking, I felt as if I was bound-and-gagged and feeling like I might burst. When I had the first drink, I was released, but soon enough, the dark feeling replaced it, which was equally unbearable. I would just have to try to keep the drinking to a minimum.

I started going to acupuncture during the triathlon for an acute shoulder injury. A single treatment had cured my shoulder instantly, so I was curious about how it might help my other ailment, even though I wasn't sure what it was. Tami's office was on the ground floor of her home. Her office smelled lightly of essential oils and was

impeccably clean without being overly sterile. Soft music played, and the sound of running water from her water filter. It felt warm and welcoming. Since the ultrasound incident, I went to see a potential primary care doctor, but the experience had not been so pleasant.

I remembered the recent doctor's appointment as I flipped through a magazine. I had called my insurance company and requested a female doctor to be my primary care physician. I hoped to establish a relationship and get some answers to the root of my problems. However, as soon as the assigned doctor had walked into the room, I knew it wasn't right. She barely looked at me and didn't smile. She asked me why I was there and asked me the usual questions. She concluded I was disease-free.

"That's it? But I drink too much, and I feel so stressed out" I tried to convince her something was in there, inside me, bothering me, haunting me, and needed to get out, despite whatever her clinical assessment had said.

"You exercise almost daily, practice yoga, eat well, and have no significant medical history. You are an extremely healthy individual. If you are concerned about your mental health, I recommend cognitive behavioral therapy, or we can discuss pharmaceutical options."

“But what do you think the mental health problem is, and why does it hurt my stomach?” I insisted. “Why would I take a pill if I don’t know what is wrong with me?”

“Sounds like cognitive behavioral therapy might be what you are wanting,” she said without looking up from her clipboard.

What even is that? I wondered. It sounded like some kind of brain programming that turned you into a robot who stopped pointing out what was wrong. No, thank you. Fuck. What the fuck good is my insurance anyways? I was very frustrated.

Sitting in Tami’s office already felt like more health care than I had received anywhere before. I told Tami a similar story as I told the MD, but I added the feelings of disgust at my appearance and my constant worry about my weight. I confessed to picking at my skin, which had tormented me for years. I expected her to finally confirm how sick I was, but she didn’t flinch.

“As far as the drinking is concerned. I would recommend eating a little protein before you go to bed if you are going to drink”. Her non-judgmental, matter-of-fact response relaxed some part of me. Do you mean I’m not a weak, disgusting idiot?

“And as far as your weight. I can see by your build and by looking at your chart that obesity is not going to be a health concern for you, so we don’t have to worry about that”

Another part of me exhaled. Appearance isn’t a health issue? Duh. It was so ingrained in my brain that “looking” fit was equivalent to good health, and her blatant statement of the facts cleared up some of my faulty logic.

“I’m going to treat you where you are today, and we can go from there.”

“OK, thank you.”

When she placed the needles in various parts of my body, I was surprised by the feeling of a subtle yet palpable electric current running through me. I felt relaxed afterward, and even though I wasn’t sure if it had cured me, I left with a high level of optimism.

I allowed myself to drink, and with some of the pressure I was putting on myself to quit off my back, I didn’t feel the need to use so much willpower and ping-pong so drastically between quitting and binging. I started to allow myself to drink whenever I felt like it, and I didn’t feel the need to drink so much at once. It seemed better than the all-or-nothing approach. It didn’t eradicate the restlessness, and I still wanted answers.

Chapter 8-Waves

Following the triathlon, I needed a new focus. I turned my attention to learning to surf, which had been a dream since living in Costa Rica. I was talking about surfing at a party and was given a guy's phone number to call.

It took a few days of building up my courage, but I sent a text and explained I had been given his number to see about going surfing. Mario responded immediately and said he was surfing the upcoming Saturday with his friend, and I was welcome to join. He gave me the address to the house and said to meet them there at 7:00 am. I barely slept the night before but fought my urge to drink so I wouldn't be hungover in the water. I worried my surfing would suck so bad that I would embarrass myself, but I was determined to try. When I pulled up to the house, two tall thin athletic men were arranging the boards on the back of a Subaru wagon.

As I exited the car, the two men greeted me with charming smiles. They were friendly enough but also seemed a bit stoic and guarded. We shook hands, and they said I could grab my board, and they would strap it on. While chatting, a woman came outside to see what was happening. She was about my age with porcelain skin and long shiny auburn hair. Her cheerful energy was a warm front.

“Hi! I'm Natasha” She reached for a hug. I was instantly put at ease.

“Hi, I’m Megan.”

“Mark, you didn’t tell me a girl was going surfing” I sensed her annoyance at her husband and was impressed at her boldness.

“You didn’t ask,” he said coldly

“I’m coming with you.” she declared.

“Well get your stuff because we are leaving”

Natasha smiled at me, seemingly unphased by her husband’s chilly disposition, which I immediately recognized but swept under the rug. We packed up and pulled out of the driveway within a few minutes. On the drive to the coast, I told them how I had lived in Costa Rica and how I had surfed a bit there and a few times in Oregon. They sensed my excitement and seemed pleased to have new blood around. As we wended through the forested highway, they drew a diagram of the surf spot we were heading to and explained the tides and things to look out for.

“I’m so nervous,” I admitted.

All three reacted in a cacophony of reassurance. “Nah, don’t be” “You will be fine” “Don’t worry.”

I felt so lucky to be with them, but my stomach was tightening, my heart was pounding, and my mouth was drying out.

Natasha was my age and my height, and we even dressed alike. Surfing was her greatest passion. I adored her instantly. We chatted easily, and she continued to assure me I would be fine surfing and they would look out for me. She said her husband was an excellent teacher, the best there was. We pulled onto the jetty and got out to look at the waves. They were big enough to break inside the river mouth, which they had been hoping for. To me, the waves looked huge.

“Ohh God,” I groaned. “I don’t think I can do this”

They laughed and excitedly got out their wet suits and started to change. I managed to get my wet suit on, although every part of me wanted to run and hide. Once we were suited up, they explained how we would have to scale the rock jetty wall, swim across the river, and catch the current out to get in position in the lineup. They said I could hang out in the white water to start.

“I’ll hang out in the white water” I reacted without hesitation.

They smiled and ensured I got down the giant boulders that made up the jetty wall, and as we pushed out across the river, I lost all strength in my elbows and wasn’t sure I remembered how to paddle. Breath. Just breathe. I tried to steady myself, and

seeing Natasha with a huge smile, paddling calmly and quickly up ahead, made me remember how to put one hand in front of the other.

I stayed with them for a bit before letting them know I would hang out and try to catch some white water, which is the crumbly part of a wave with enough excess energy to push you forward and give you a chance to stand up.

They waved me goodbye with huge smiles and paddled on.

My nerves were firing like the fourth of July, and my limbs felt like limp spaghetti noodles. Why had I agreed to this? As the waves crumbled towards me, I turned and paddled and caught a little momentum that carried me enough to stand up and ride a little way. The little ride was enough to motivate me to stay in the water, and I paddled back to the same spot. I watched as one of the guys caught a wave and sped down the face carving back up to the top before slashing back down. I had seen this scene many times, but it never ceased to take my breath away. He had long since finished his ride and turned to paddle back out when I caught the leftover crumbs for my little ride. I felt more comfortable but wasn't about to go out any further. As I paddled back out again, I looked up to see the face of a towering wall of water forming beyond the lineup. As it rose and neared its peak, Natasha blasted off the top. I couldn't believe my eyes. She scooped down to the bottom of the wave, crouched down, and blasted back up to the top like a rocket before gliding down the center of

the face as the wave curled behind her. I had seen hundreds of men surf like that, but I had never seen a woman in wet-suit surf like that, especially not this close-up. She was my age and size, and suddenly my mind exploded with possibilities. I had been messing around with the idea of learning to surf but didn't believe it was possible until that moment, which changed everything. If she could do it, I could do it, and I would do it. It was my new single-minded focus.

Natasha and I became fast friends and spent many days surfing, camping, and going out. Natasha and her husband had a lovely house that was spotlessly clean. I always felt like Pigpen dragging dirt and smokestacks behind me whenever I hung out with them. I idolized them even though I sensed there was tension in their marriage. They appeared as the perfect surfing king and queen couple. I envied her clean, respectable life. As the months went by, I became increasingly engrossed in surfing. It's all I could think about. The experience of getting in the ocean was massive, and nothing in my daily life compared. It was all I wanted to do. When the weekends were over, returning to work felt like leaving a mystical wild world only to arrive back in a mind-numbingly mundane yet super stressful sleepwalk. The more I surfed, the harder it was to accept that my life was becoming all it was meant to be. I wanted to stay in the ocean. I wanted the feeling of being in the sea to be my constant. I had tasted this energy living near the sea in Costa Rica, and I was now tasting it again stronger. I didn't want the average comfortable life, and I started dreaming again of something

more. In graduate school, I read a book by Joseph Campbell about following your bliss to find your soul's destiny; his words came back to me now, strong and clear. I allowed myself to daydream about what I would do if I could do anything. I didn't know what it meant to feel blissful without alcohol, but surfing came as close as possible, so that must be what I should follow.

Natasha and some other surfing friends had come to my little cottage for dinner. I decided to let them in on my daydreaming. However, I was questioning if what Joseph Campbell wrote about was something they would understand.

Maybe they would think I was weird and crazy.

“Hey, so. I was trying to think of what I would do if I could do anything in the world, and so the thing I came up with was... it's really crazy and stupid but kind of funny and anyways ok so... the thing I thought was I would want to get barreled in a bikini”. Getting barreled is when the wave curls around you, and you are surfing inside a tube, fully encased in water. I laughed as I said it to hide the tender hope of a dream, “Wouldn't that be the best? Warm water, surf every day?” I continued to laugh and expected them to laugh too, but they did not balk at me.

“You can do that, Megan. You just need to find a wave,” Mario encouraged

“Yeah, you can totally do it, Megan. Why not?” Natasha chimed in.

My mind quickly transformed the dream into the steps I needed to take to make it happen. Their support and belief in me were all the affirmation I needed to pull the trigger. I decided I needed to pursue my newly found surfing dream, and I put in my notice at work. I felt there was more to it than surfing, that maybe surfing would help me find my soul or whatever I longed for. I was not scared. It was exhilarating, and my resignation shocked my supervisors and my colleagues. They had accepted me into their deeply enmeshed family-like culture. I did form a few strong bonds with people I would later learn I was connected to by unseen common threads.

By the time I resigned, mere months after I had dreamt up this change, I had barely saved any money, maybe about \$3,000. I didn't know where I would go or what I would do for work, but I knew I had to quit to create the tension I would need to figure it out. I had heard of online speech therapy and thought I could try that from abroad. I Googled women's surf camps around the world, figuring that the location of a women's surf camp would have a wave at the right level for me. Not too advanced, but not too overcrowded with beginners either. I found two appealing locations, one in the Philippines and one in Nicaragua. I veered towards the one in the Philippines because I had already spent a lot of time in Central America and felt I should spread my wings. I started looking more carefully into remote work.

I realized the time difference in the Philippines would prove nearly impossible when working in real-time with children in the US. The currency, language, and

upfront rent practices proved too daunting to navigate alone, and I veered back toward Nicaragua. I knew the language, the time zone was compatible with online work, and it was cheap. The surf camp I found did not show its location, but through my own investigation, I figured out the approximate area. It looked like online work was possible, but all reports were that the Internet was unreliable along the Nicaragua coastline, especially the remote beaches I was interested in living on. I was offered a job with an online company, but at the last minute, I refused and decided to look for a work trade to scout out the beach and the Internet before committing to the job. I found a position on a remote beach in Northern Nicaragua, near where I calculated the women's surf camp was held. I emailed a woman looking for a bartender and someone to help with English-speaking guests at a small beachfront hostel with small cabins and a rustic dorm. She said meals and a room were included in the work trade. We spoke on the phone, and this middle-aged woman from Texas explained to me how her little sister had started the hostel after backpacking around the world, but she had recently passed away, and she wanted to keep it open in her memory. I didn't think to ask how she died, nor did I ask her anything about the area or accommodations. All that mattered was making my plan happen, and I completely ignored any potential downfalls. I refused to consider even a sliver of evidence contrary to my carefully planned dream panning out. I agreed to take the position and bought a ticket to arrive in Nicaragua at the end of the summer, which was just around the corner.

Chapter 9 -Night Terrors

Some people told me I was brave for moving to Nicaragua to follow my dreams, and some thought I was stupid. I was neither brave nor stupid. I was doing what came naturally, and I wasn't scared. I was also influenced by forces I couldn't understand or control. I didn't know I was running from anything. In fact, I believed I was running toward my soul's destiny. I see now; it was both.

The trip to the hostel was long and draining. It involved multiple bus rides connecting me through three major Nicaraguan cities. The final bus stop was in a mid-sized town, the closest civilization to where I was headed. From there, the bus ride was over an hour on a paved highway before exiting onto a peninsula and the long dusty road which trailed along the coastline. It took another forty-five minutes bumping and stopping along this final stretch of narrow highway before passing by about a mile-long stretch of rustic beach-front houses, half-built structures, and a few other hostels before reaching my stop. I stepped off the bus and was pleased standing in front of a gated property filled with a grove of palm trees. Over the entrance hung a hand-painted artisan sign reading "Rancho del Cielo." The gate was unlocked, and I ambled towards the reception area; my heart fluttered with excitement, and my mind melted into a half-dream state. It was surreal to finally be back on along the Central American coastline. It was a dream I had buried over ten years earlier, and suddenly

here I was again. It felt so good to feel my skin soften in the humidity and the sand sink under my feet.

As I approached what appeared to be a covered outdoor dining area, I announced my presence, “Buenas, Hola, Hello.” I cautiously called out.

A Nicaraguan woman a bit older than me emerged from a small kitchen with eyebrows furrowed. She had on knee-length jean shorts and an oversized t-shirt. Her hair was slicked back into a ponytail, and she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel before stepping out to see who had arrived.

“Soy Megan,” I tried to sound friendly and confident.

“Mega,” she said back.

“Si, voy a trabajar aqui” I’m going to work here. I hoped that made sense.

“Ahhh si, Mega” Her face softened to a charming smile.

“Bienvenidos a Rancho Del Cielo. Soy Raquel”

“Mucho Gusto Raquel”

“Ven aca, sientete, baja tu mochila” Sit, take off your backpack.

I was dirty, hot, tired, and hungry, and as I removed the sweaty straps and the backpack's weight fell into the sand, I nearly lifted off.

Raquel had a tough-looking appearance and a wide bright smile. I could tell her way of interacting and speaking slow Spanish was crafted by many years of dealing with English-speaking backpackers. She had a mischievous sense of humor and knew what to say to charm backpackers into thinking they were remarkable for having found the remote hostel.

Raquel and I chatted, and she walked me around the property. The kitchen, where we had met, also served as a covered open-air reception area. There was a phone and a bulletin board of tourist attractions, which included a zip-line tour in the jungle, horseback riding, and trips to the nearby volcanoes. The accommodations included rustic thatch-roof cabins painted brightly with basic beds and mosquito nets. There was also a large dorm and a shared bathroom and showers. Just past the corridor of cabins was the star attraction of the hostel, which was a palm thatch roof-covered bar that looked out onto the bright, expansive sea, just strides away from the breaking waves. The heat was sharp, and the sand was so hot that even with sandals, the edges of your feet would burn as your foot sank momentarily before lifting your foot again in relief of another step. The bar was shaded, and the cool sandy floor was a relief. The view of the ocean sucked you in. It caused your eyes to start glazing over into a trance one would imagine falling into when coming upon an oasis after being long lost

in the desert. Raquel questioned me and my relationship status, my age, and my motivation for coming to Nicaragua. One of her eyebrows raised as I explained I wanted to get away from the stress of the US. She wondered about me from the beginning. I could tell she sensed something lingering in my shadows.

Raquel told me all about the original owner, a spirited and generous humanitarian. She, too, had been a lone wanderer and had landed there to find peace and drink her days away without anyone telling her she was wrong for doing so. Much later, Raquel told me she died alone in a hotel room. She had bled from the inside out, and maggots had already gotten to her when they found her. I think Raquel may have sensed in me a similar sensitivity, pain, and longing to escape. I kept noticing a flash of concern in her eye.

“Vamos a buscar un novio para ti” We will look for a boyfriend for you. She said enthusiastically as she blinked away the ghost.

“Ok, esta bien. Buscamos un novio” Alright, let’s look for a boyfriend. I played along even though I wasn’t serious. I was sure I had learned my lesson and wasn’t interested in meeting anyone.

“Creo tengo el novio perfecto. Se llama Danny. El es alto, fuerte, inteligente, con ojos amarillos y piel Verde”. I believe I have the perfect boyfriend for you. His name is Danny, and he is tall, strong, intelligent, and has yellow eyes and green skin. My face

contorted, and I wondered if I understood her correctly. Yellow eyes and green skin? Was he a frog?

“Hmm, bueno. Quisiera conocerle” I’d like to meet this frog. What would I have to lose anyhow? There was no way in hell I was getting attached this time.

Raquel walked me back to the kitchen area and introduced me to Nana. Nana was a short, plump big chested mother of many. She wore a floral print muumuu, and her straight black hair was also slicked back in a ponytail. She did all the cooking for the hostel. Nana was serious and suspicious but dutifully welcoming.

The first few weeks at the hostel were a mix of bliss and terror. The mornings felt sweeter than anything I had tasted in a long time. I loved drinking coffee with the women, listening to stories, feeling the ocean breeze on my face, and getting an intimate taste of this remote wild stretch of coastline.

Once breakfast was over and the temperature rose, I would go to the bar to clean and organize and try not to think about opening the cold beers at my fingertips. The surf wasn’t good, but I refused to admit this to myself. I had bought a tiny little surfboard which was way too small for me, and the wind and the currents in front of the hostel were aggressive, and the beach was steep. I refused to admit this place was not the

place of my surfing dreams, though there was something hypnotizing about it. It felt like the swirling, spiraling eye of the snake, luring you in and lulling you to stay.

Nana and Raquel told me I wouldn't be alone at the hostel much longer because Jane would soon arrive. Jane was the head of the turtle rescue project. She was a middle-aged German woman who had been dear friends with the late owner. They had connected their deep love for animals. However, Jane detested heavy drinking. She was controlled, focused, and had no patience for overindulgence. When she arrived, her presence brought me mixed emotions. She commanded respect and was not the least bit scared of trekking out on turtle rescues alone in the middle of the night on this remote, eerie stretch of beach. Her confidence comforted me.

On the other hand, her presence felt like a stern teacher, and we all had to watch ourselves and behave or else get in trouble. Jane spent half the year living at the hostel tending to the turtle rescues and half the year working an administrative job in Germany. Her rigid presence starkly contrasted with the hostel vibe, which was tantalizing and permissive.

My first few weeks at the hostel were lonely, so when the occasional guests arrived, it was thrilling. The cool shaded bar was as much relief for backpackers as it was for me, and the guests and I spent the long hot afternoons drinking beers and exchanging stories. The sunsets were almost always a spectacular light show of purple

and pink exploding from within towering ominous gray thunderclouds. The tourists would wander wide-eyed onto the beach, awe-struck. It felt like we were on another planet.

When the hostel had guests, I was ok. I would get buzzed and sleep better knowing there were others around. When it was only me, I was terrified. I would stay up all night, spooked by every sound, which was many. I would hear footsteps slowly stepping outside of my window. Or would I? I would imagine every type of horror and have half-waking nightmares to match. When morning came, I was so relieved. The coffee, daylight, and company of others made my nighttime terror seem irrational. In this way, the long hot days and long haunted nights would repeat. There were strings of days with no visitors, and these were the days I would start to come apart. I would try to write the blog I had planned to write or study Spanish, but the lethargy from the heat and the restlessness would start to nag at me, and it was everything I could do to not crack a beer, which eventually, I would give in to. Having the first drink was like finally unbuttoning jeans, which were three sizes too small and had been cutting off my circulation since time immemorial.

One early afternoon I was lying in the hammock drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette when Jane approached. She made me nervous. I felt like I was about to get in trouble, one of the worst feelings. She sat down and told me that she had seen her friend drink herself to death, and she warned me not to go down the same road.

“Don’t throw your life away,” she stated clearly.

“This is no good here. What has happened here is not good. I see you, and you need to be very careful.”

Her words reverberated fear and shame throughout my body, and I assured her I wasn’t like her friend who had died.

I tried to discipline myself out of drinking every day but stretching my willpower backfired. The more I tried to resist, the more I would drink after the rubber band inevitably snapped me back. When guests arrived, I was relieved because drinking with them was justified as part of my job duties and part of showing people a good time and making the hostel money. The bar was the source of most of the hostel’s income, and my role was essential to Nana and Raquel. They were pleased with my ability to entertain the guests and keep them engaged at the bar for long hours and late into the evening. Even those with little interest in drinking could barely resist the company and the relief of the shaded bar and the hypnotic view.

Raquel and I became closer, and we would fill some of the long hours of the afternoon with something productive. We would meet under the shade of the bar with plans to help each other with our respective second language acquisition, but Raquel would mostly end up telling me stories. I asked her about the mysterious man who would sometimes walk along the property line. She confided it was her husband, who

she was separated from. She also revealed that he had been abusive to her, and he wasn't allowed on the property. The baseball bat propped up behind the bar was meant for him, just in case. This came as a shock to me. I was glad Raquel trusted me with this information, but I was also very concerned and felt I needed to do something to help her.

After another troubled and sleepless night, I decided to call the owner, who lived in Texas. I wanted to tell her what Raquel had told me. My voice shook, and I was expecting a frantic reaction, but she sighed. She already knew. She said they had been trying to help get Raquel away from him for years, but they could do nothing. Calling the police wasn't an option. If the police came from the neighboring town, they were corrupt and would cause more problems than they would solve, so nobody called the police. She told me to call Frank, the neighbor, if I ever had trouble. She said he had a gun. I hung up the phone. It didn't occur to me that this might not be a safe situation for me, and it never crossed my mind to leave.

The neighbor, an odd ex-pat who lived next door, would occasionally stop by the bar. He was a large loafing man from South Carolina. His personality seemed trapped somewhere between an ex-military Republican and an animal-loving, gentle giant with Asperger's syndrome. He would order a Pepsi and talk about the turtles. He said not to worry about Raquel's husband because he was only interested in hurting Raquel. Allowing such information to soothe my mind was among many disturbing

psychological phenomena of living on this remote beach. Otherwise, this strange man wasn't much help.

Not long after Raquel confided in me about her husband, she showed up with a black eye. When I saw her, my face recorded the impact, and her tough outer shell momentarily collapsed, and tears poured down her face. I felt desperate to help her, and listening wasn't enough.

Something had to be done, but I didn't know yet what.

Raquel quickly wiped her tears away and returned to her gimmicks and a broad smile. She told me I needed a man and didn't fight her. I allowed her to change the subject.

Chapter 10 - Jailhouse

A group of guests staying at the hostel booked a zipline tour. The tour guide was Danny, the young man Raquel wanted to set me up with. Instead of having him pick up money from the reception area like he usually did, she asked him to pick up his payment at the bar so we could meet. When I saw him walking towards the bar, my knees buckled, and my heart raced. He was much younger than me, tall with broad shoulders and thick lean muscles. He had a baseball cap backward. As he approached the bar, I noticed his “yellow” eyes, which were honey-colored against his latte skin. We shared a couple of beers, and when he left, he casually said he would see me around. As he walked away, my brain and body felt like they were slowly filling up with a liquid tranquilizer. I already started fitting him into my next happily ever after. There was nothing I could do to stop the all-encompassing chemical tsunami from taking me under. From that moment on, all I did was long for him and daydream about seeing him again.

The next time he stopped by the hostel, a colossal tropical thunderstorm engulfed the peninsula. We spent the afternoon drinking beers until the day had turned into night, and the sky finally released itself in a deafening downpour. He had ridden his motorcycle, and he said he couldn't ride in the storm and asked if it would be OK if he slept in the dorm. I felt nervous and told him I needed to ask Jane if it was OK. She said it was fine if he stayed, so I ignored my nervousness and took her approval as

a green light that he was safe. Danny lay in the bottom bunk across the room from me, and we talked. I spoke English to him, and he spoke Spanish to me, and we managed to have something resembling a conversation until I dozed off. Part of me longed for him to join me, but he never did. Once during the night, I opened my eyes, and he was wide awake, looking back at me. I smiled and closed my eyes again. In the morning, he kissed me on the head before leaving, and whatever was left of my brain turned to soup. I could think of nothing else but him.

A few days later, when the air was thick with a looming storm, he stopped by again to have afternoon beers. We drank and chatted until the sky cracked open, and then we ran to the dorm room. He lay in the bed across the room as the rain pounded and crashing thunder shook the dormitory. After a few minutes of talking, I told him he could lay with me. He said he would give me a massage, and although it seems obvious looking back, I didn't expect this shy young man to turn me over and kiss me with the confidence he did. Within seconds we were intertwined in a physical relationship I further mistook for love. He would sleep over a few times a week with his face pressed to mine, wrapping me close all night. I felt safe and protected and completely mad for him. I rarely saw him during the day. When he arrived at night, we barely spoke, and our relationship took place almost entirely after dark. Once the bar had closed and I was half drunk and lying wide-eyed in bed, he would knock. Busy season was picking up, and I had moved from the dorm to the volunteer's quarters, a

dirty old shed with a bug-infested sand floor. Danny was way more disgusted by my living situation than me. Despite his repulsion for the room, he would stay the night with me in the tiny twin bed with a foam mattress under an old ripped-up mosquito net and then leave before breakfast.

Over the coming weeks, Danny told me more about his life. His father had died in a boat accident while working as a drug trafficker. He didn't know if he was murdered or drowned. He just never came back. He told me his sister was murdered by her husband. His stories didn't alert me to any potential danger but emboldened my desire to save him. I didn't share any stories of my trauma because I didn't know I had any, and I felt I owed my privileged life to him. Sometimes I wouldn't see or hear from him for days, but upon seeing him, I would shove down my worries and melt into the muddled numbing feeling of safety I felt in his arms. Raquel and Nana realized our relationship was becoming more than a fling. While I sensed a bit of concern, my defensive part wouldn't let anything interfere with this newfound love story. He was going to be my husband. I was going to have his children. We were going to live happily ever after.

Due to popular demand, I started teaching yoga classes at the hostel. Even though I didn't have formal training, I knew enough to put together morning classes on the beach. People from the neighboring hostels heard about it, and more and more people joined every day. I was constantly sleep-deprived, famished, and slightly

hangover. Still, the better part of me loved the mornings and teaching, so I powered through.

Nana's oldest son would often do maintenance work on the property. One afternoon after yoga, when I was lying in the hammock having coffee, he asked me if I was in love with Danny. I said I thought so, and he asked me point blank if I knew he had other girlfriends. My stomach retracted, but I wouldn't let myself believe him. I was not inhabiting my senses, and nothing could disrupt the story of how this would turn out. I told myself he was just saying this terrible lie because he was jealous of Danny.

A few days later, a local man, who had a few too many drinks at the bar, told me Danny had other girlfriends and was a dog. It sent a fire of rage rushing from within me, and I told him he had to leave the bar.

Not long after, a couple of American guys around my age who lived on the beach year-round stopped by the bar. After several drinks, one of them told me that Danny had been caught with his pants down on the beach with American girls many times. I snapped at him and told him he was a drunk and that if he kept harassing me, he would have to leave.

Two young couples and their toddler children arrived at the hostel, which brought a lovely feeling of light to the otherwise dark undertow of my world. They

were interested in how I had landed there and in morning yoga. After chatting, one of the women and I discovered we had lived in the same college town. We both worked for the same non-profit agency helping sexual assault survivors. Our connection was instant. Over the coming days, she introduced me to Reiki and guided meditations, both new to me. Even though I didn't understand or feel anything from the energy work or the meditations, I enjoyed our time together. Eventually, I confided to her about the abuse Raquel was dealing with. She shared my concern and coached me on continuing to empower her to take steps toward keeping herself safe. The lovely young Mothers and I would enjoy long, relaxed mornings talking over breakfast and many cups of coffee. The daytime felt sweet with these women and their darling and funny children crawling around in the sand. One evening, they met Danny. The mood shifted, and I sensed the women's concern. I could tell they didn't get a good vibe from him, but I shoved that feeling back down. Danny said he couldn't stay that night, and I stayed up drinking with the woman's husband.

Once the men had finally drunk enough to know they would be in trouble with their wives the next day, I stumbled to bed and fell into a rare deep sleep. I was surprised to hear a knock at my door much later than Danny usually arrived. Half awake, I opened the door, and he walked in silently and didn't get into bed but stood in the dark against the wall. I sat back in bed and told him to come over, but he didn't speak.

“What's wrong, Danny?” I sensed something was off.

He didn't say anything but flipped on the light and to my horror he was covered in blood. I gasped and time stopped. He was in serious trouble. I thought he had been mauled by a wild animal or mangled in machinery.

“Oh my God,” I finally exhaled as I ran to him, flipping into a complete panic, thinking we needed to get him to the doctor. I grabbed a towel and approached him in horror. He was calm.

“I'm in trouble,” he said.

“What the fuck? Oh my God. What happened. Tell me?” My eyes scanned his face, searching urgently for answers

“Raquel’s husband,” he said with a calm yet slightly cavalier tone. His mood registered in my gut as disturbing. He was showing off. I quickly shoved that knowing down too.

“Raquel called me and said he was coming to beat her. I went on my motorcycle to help her, and I met her husband on the road and beat him. I left him in the road, and I think he might die”.

“Jesus Christ, oh my god. We need to call the police! Danny, we need to call the police right now, right now. We need to call the police” Thoughts spun through my head at lightning speed.

“No,” he laughed, seemingly unbothered and as if I had said the stupidest thing in the world. “We don’t call the police here. I need to shower, and then I need to go check on him to see if he is still alive”.

I didn’t know what to say or do. I just stood there. I let him go, and he showered and came back and kissed me goodbye as if he were the hero in a fucked-up action movie. About an hour later, he returned and said Raquel’s husband had been taken to the hospital, but he wasn’t sure if he was still alive.

“We need to go to the police Danny and tell them you were defending Raquel. I can tell them her husband had been beating her. I saw her face. Everyone knows”

“No, trust me. No police,” he said firmly and with the annoyed smile you get when you hear something ridiculous.

“Whatever you do, don’t tell Nana” He had his mind made up and told us we should sleep. We got in bed under the mosquito net, and he slept fine. I did not sleep.

In the morning, when the sun finally rose, I woke Danny up and we were sitting up in bed discussing what needed to be done. That day, he had a zipline tour and convinced me to act like nothing happened. He left for his tour and Raquel had arrived pale-faced looking like she had seen death. She gave me a gravely serious look before switching on her charm to greet the guests arriving for breakfast. I was fuming at the idea of keeping this a secret, and I shook my head at her, but I didn’t say anything. Nana came out of the kitchen in a frenzy because it was all over the news that Raquel’s husband was in critical condition in the hospital, and the police were looking for whoever had attacked him. They said he was brain-damaged and may die. Raquel acted like she was as surprised and didn’t know anything, and my stomach ached with dread. Later in the afternoon, I told the women what had happened, and they were appalled I was covering for Danny.

“Violence is never the answer,” one said from a deep and serious place within her. I wasn’t sure I agreed, but she was wise, and her words landed in a place I would revisit later.

The following day Danny and I were sitting up in bed and I was trying to convince him we needed to tell Nana and come clean and tell the police. He just laughed and refused.

There was a knock on the door. I looked at him concerned and his expression didn't change. I shrugged my shoulders, unsure of who it could be, and hopped up to open it. I cracked the door a peeked out. My heart dropped into my stomach.

It was the police, and they asked for Danny. I looked at Danny, and he got up without saying anything and walked out. The police handcuffed him and put him in their beat-up blue police truck. Danny had a strange expression, as if a twinge of worry was trying to surface, which he hid with a near-smile. I was frantically begging the police not to take him, telling them that it wasn't fair, that he was defending Raquel. They didn't acknowledge me and simply drove away.

As I watched him disappear down the dusty road in the back of a dark blue beat-up Nicaraguan police truck, I couldn't hold back my tears. I walked out to the beach, sat on a huge bolder, and surrendered to a long cry before finally admitting to myself that this was all too much.

I decided I needed to get out of there. I wanted to go home. I was in over my head. As the tide rose and fell, I let all my fantasies float out to sea and I came to peace with my decision. Jane appeared behind me and sat with me on the rock. By

then, everyone had heard what had happened. I told her I had decided I needed to leave. To my surprise she questioned me.

“Megan, do you love him?”

Her question put me right back on shaky ground.

“I think so, I don’t know” I felt frantic tears rising again.

“Megan, if you love him, you need to help him,” She advised. I was shocked, and my whole perspective changed. Maybe I should help him? Perhaps I was being a privileged brat in thinking I could just walk away and leave him to rot in jail when all he did was defend Raquel, or so his story went.

“What should I do?” I plead pathetically. I had an iron will but vaporous discernment – a disastrous combination.

“You need to go with his mom to visit him in jail and see if you can help. She is old and shouldn’t go alone. You need to support his mom”.

I took a deep breath, sniffed back the tears, and felt convinced she was right. I needed help.

“OK, I’ll have Raquel call and tell her I will go with her.”

“This is life down here, Megan. You came here and live here, and this is your problem now”.

“OK, yes, I see.”

The young moms and their sweet families had come to the end of their vacation, which ended bittersweetly with this situation weighing heavily on everyone’s minds and hearts. They were heading home. I was now engrossed in a possible murder trial in a country that did not play by my rules. I had made the decision to stay. They left,

The next morning, I caught the bus to meet Danny’s mom and rode with her to the neighboring town to work on getting him out of jail, which by all the stories I was being told, was the most dangerous place someone could be. The police were corrupt, and the conditions were so raunchy that he could die of an infection, or some other kind of filth-induced condition. I sat in the vinyl school bus seat next to his small elderly mother and introduced myself. She didn’t seem to understand why I was there or why I was saying I was Danny’s girlfriend, but she thanked me for helping her. We rode most of the way in silence.

The large cement jailhouse was next to an outdoor market at the edge of the town’s dusty, loud central plaza. I waited outside while his mother went inside to visit her son. I was starving and thirsty and sat on the cement ledge of the park wall, drank a Coke, and smoked cigarettes. I talked to his best friend, whom I had met several

times. He had heard what happened and was there to try to help and was flitting between another group of people lingering at a distant corner of the park square and me. He seemed nervous but also somewhat excited by the drama of all that was happening. It was a couple of hours before Danny's mother re-emerged from the jail looking worried and tired. She said he needed food and had asked for cigarettes. She said she couldn't come back the next day and asked if I could bring him these things. I agreed. Later I would learn that Danny's longtime girlfriend was also there that day and that his best friend was more nervous about keeping us from discovering each other than getting Danny out of jail.

The next morning, I went alone on the bus back into town to try to bring Danny the food and cigarettes he had asked for. I went to the outdoor market, which was adjacent to the jailhouse. I could taste the smell of raw and cooked meats in my throat, but I didn't wince because I had to be tough now. I went up to one of the folding tables covered in a checkered plastic tablecloth and bought a Styrofoam plate full of cooked meat and fried beans mixed with rice. The vendor wrapped the plate in thin blue plastic baggies. I also bought cigarettes before walking inside the jail. A few mismatched folding chairs lined the tall cement wall of the waiting area. A couple of the chairs were occupied by people who looked up from their phones at me. I noted the surprise on their faces to see a white girl, but they quickly returned to scrolling on their phones.

At the far end of the waiting room was a man in a police uniform seated at a desk. He was also looking at his phone. I approached him and told him I was there to leave Danny food. He didn't ask me any questions and told me to wait with the others until it was time to allow visitors. Visitors? I was going to go back and see him? Were they going to let me in? I stood there staring blankly at the police officer momentarily, but no words came out. I turned around, walked back over, and sat on one of the chairs with the others. For the next hour, more people arrived. Everyone was checking their phones and looking up to watch their kids scooting around on the dusty tile floor. I noticed people stealing quick glances at me but minding their business. When the time came to line up, I could barely believe what I had gotten myself into. Were they really going out to let me in? Was I going inside a Nicaraguan jail to visit my boyfriend, who could face murder charges? It was surreal, and I felt strangely calm, not all there.

When the time came, we lined up. We were ushered around a corner facing a square courtyard piled high with confiscated bicycles. A breezeway ran in front of a series of large jail cell doors with tiny, barred windows. The arms and faces of the inmates stretched out and pressed between the bars as they whistled, cat-called, and yelled at the sight of visitors. It was jarring and chaotic which caused a deeper numbing sensation to wash over me. The police officer opened the door to one of the cells, and a line of men poured out. Danny was one of them. When he saw me, he looked momentarily stunned, although the shock was quickly replaced by his usual

stoic expression. He approached me as the other prisoners lined up to face their visitors while the guards stood by.

“What are you doing here?” He asked plainly

“Your Mom asked me to come. Are you OK?” My face strained, and my eyes desperately searched his as they had the night he had showed up covered in blood.

“I need cigarettes. I need them to trade.”

“I brought you some, they should be with your food” I handed him the paper plate covered in a plastic bag. It had been inspected by the guard and the cigarettes had already been removed, but I didn’t know that. The guards didn’t say anything to me, which was lucky because I later learned cigarettes were banned. It was illegal to try to sneak in prohibited items. They gave me a pass, just took the cigarettes, and said nothing.

Danny and I didn’t say much more. I kept asking him if he was OK and expressing my frantic concern. He kissed me on the cheek, and the prisoners whose hands and faces pushed their way between the prison bars howled.

Raquel’s husband stabilized in the coming weeks, but the rumor was that he was permanently brain-damaged. I never knew what the truth was. I heard many versions of the story of what happened the night of the attack. One person told me that Danny

had gone to Raquel's house and beat her husband with a crowbar. I insisted that wasn't true at the time, but I will never know the truth. Raquel managed to pay off the police to get Danny out of jail with emergency funds and her savings from the hostel. He got out of jail only to be picked up again by the police a week later, and the process of bribing repeated itself. I learned this was normal and it was how the police made money and why they were never called. I had decided again I needed to leave and go back home and save some money so I could come back, and Danny and I could move to the city and get away from all of this once and for all. I was malnourished, depleted, and coping almost entirely with alcohol, cigarettes, and coffee, but I was determined to stay loyal to Danny. I bought a ticket to fly home a month later.

My final weeks at the hostel were strained with constant worry about Danny getting picked up by the police again. New rumors spread daily, and there were added worries of retaliation from the family of the man who he had beaten up. It felt like a small-town war could break out. Or was it just gossip? I never knew. I didn't want to leave Danny but was ready to fly back to the States. I planned to earn a lump of money before returning to Nicaragua to live in the city, which would have strong enough internet for remote work. I had it all planned out. Danny didn't protest, but I didn't give him much of a chance. In my mind, there was no other choice. We needed

to get him away from the beach and out of trouble. We were going to be together, and this is how it was going to happen.

During our final weeks together, he became more and more distant. I felt pain and frustration at his cold behavior and started questioning everything again. I wanted reassurance from him the morning I left, but he was silent. I cried, and Danny didn't say anything, but as he turned to leave, he told me he had left me a note under my pillow. Once his motorcycle disappeared out of view, I went back into our sand-floored shack and opened the letter. To my surprise, he had written everything I desperately longed to hear. He said he loved me more than anything and couldn't wait to marry me, have children, and start our life together in the city. I didn't cry but felt a tremendous sense of relief. This was it. The struggles were nearly over.

I returned to the US, and six months turned into a year, but I did not give up on our plans. Danny continued to have trouble with the police, and once I sent him money to pay them off to avoid going back to jail again. At least, that is the story he told me. We rarely talked on the phone, and I hung on by a thread to his texts every few days and sometimes every few weeks. Things weren't going well, and we didn't really have a relationship, but I didn't care about reality, I cared about the dream, and I steamrolled forward. I felt obligated to save him and was determined to get my happily ever after. I had become mostly insane.

Chapter 11 - Glimmer

In addition to doing a travel speech therapy gig in the US, I also took a summer bar-tending job. The little town I lived in had a population that hovered around one hundred people, including loggers, working cowboys, forest service workers, and retired veterans. The bar shared some common features with the bar in my hometown. Taxidermy lined the walls, and the deer head that hung above the liquor shelf was a battery-operated talking head. Occasionally, the talking taxidermy would spurt out a flirty comment in a female voice and give the customers a laugh. The bar was small; three other waitresses did everything from prepping, cooking, dishwashing, and serving tables.

On Tuesdays, they served \$2.00 tacos, and everyone in and around town came in for it. I became known at the bar as the hippie girl. I gave one of the cattle ranchers and his ranch-hand hippie nicknames. Randy was coconut because he was rough on the outside but sweet on the inside. I named Dillon Stardust because although he was devastatingly handsome, he needed to use his imagination more. They gave me a cowgirl nickname in return and called me Cheyenne.

It was just about a week before my plane flew out to return to Nicaragua, and the diner was packed for my last taco Tuesday. I promised to hang out late and party with

everyone once I was off my shift. The dinner hour was winding down. Before the bar started to get busy, I went outside, turned a plastic bucket upside down, and sat next to the dumpsters to smoke a cigarette. I grabbed my phone, and after taking a few drags, I pushed on the touch screen and saw a text from an unknown number. As I read the words, it took a minute for me to place them in time and space, which seemed to suddenly come to a halt. The text was from a woman who said she was a missionary working in Nicaragua and had known Danny for many years. She said he wanted her to tell me he had another girlfriend before I moved back. He was too scared to tell me himself. I started to shake, and as the words took shape inside me, I felt as if something had been scooped out of my right side with an ice cream scoop, and I grabbed my stomach. I didn't cry but sat there gripping the sudden sharp emptiness. My mind filled with fog as my plans quickly started coming apart like a stack of papers being blown off a table by a fan. Each piece of the story flashed before me one after another before floating away. I went inside and went in the bathroom and felt like I would throw up. I coughed and gagged until the nausea seemed to pass, and then I sat on the floor shaking, wiping the saliva from the corners of my mouth. The tears weren't coming. In the short amount of time, I sat there on the bathroom floor, I had already decided I was still going to move back to Nicaragua. I remembered I had once had a dream to surf, and I gathered up this story and started stacking those old papers back together. I wasn't going to let this stop me, and I wasn't going to allow myself to give in and give up. I opened the bathroom door, and

the bar owner, who had become a motherly friend, saw in my eyes that something was wrong.

“Oh, my God. What the fuck? What happened? Come here,” she said as she opened her arms and hugged me. The tears started to fall.

“He has a girlfriend. I’m such an idiot. I’m such a fucking idiot,” I cried before sniffing my nose and backing away from the hug to wipe my eyes and gather myself together.

“You are not an idiot. He is an idiot and a mother fucker” She consoled, pausing a long while before letting out a long sigh. “What are you going to do?” She paused again. “Are you going back to Nicaragua?”

“Hell yes, I’m still going. Fuck him. Hell yes. I had plans before I met him. Fuck him” She sighed again deeply, as a mother does when they know their kids have their minds made up and won’t listen to reason.

“You take care of yourself,” she said, looking at me with her worried blue sparkly eyes.

“I will. Fuuuuuck. OK, I’m going to get back out to the bar. I need the distraction.”

“OK, honey. Are you sure you are, OK?” I avoided making direct contact with her worried eyes.

“Fuck, I don’t know. Yes. Yes, I’m OK. Thank you. I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.”

I switched back on to my friendly and sarcastic bar-tending personality. Coconut, Stardust, and the rest of the crowd used my going away party as an excuse to drink more heavily than usual. Stardust, the handsome cowboy, bought me one tequila and two tequila, and by the third tequila shot, we were outside on a bench making out. I was crying, and he assured me he would care for me. I reminded him of his rodeo queen fiancé, but he said she had cheated on him too. He invited me to come back to his cowboy camp. The tequila started kicking in even harder, and I continued to drink a beer as the world began to go black. I got in his truck with him, but I told him I needed to go home first and get a change of clothes. When we pulled up to the house I was living at, he waited in the truck with his country music blasting. In a stroke of luck, I fell asleep on my bed and never went back out. He had enough sense not to come after me, and when I woke up in the morning, the world arrived back in my body like a thousand-pound dump truck of anguish. The only thing I could think to do was open a beer. I curled up in a ball, still drunk, and sipped on an opened can that I must have grabbed from the fridge on my way to my room the night before. My roommate knocked on the door, and I had no choice but to let her in.

“Megan. What is wrong? What happened?” I started to cry and told her the story.

She grabbed the beer and told me it wasn't going to help. I knew she was right. I gave myself a couple of days to recover from the hangover, and I had no choice but to switch my focus to packing. I also need to be clear-headed enough to prepare for work before flying out, landing in a new city in a foreign country, and starting a new job. My will be done. My will be done. My will be done. Nothing and nobody were going to stop me.

I flew to Nicaragua with a job and an apartment lined up, not knowing a single soul in Leon, where I was moving. I was destroyed inside, but I moved forward like a freight train crazed to succeed and follow the damn bliss.

My new job as an online speech therapist started the day after I arrived in Leon. Leon is a bustling colonial city known for a mix of vibrant progressive university energy and deep-rooted Nicaraguan traditions. Leon is also known for being hot. The oppressive heat and government do little to contain the city's spirit. To get to know Leon, you must get past its hot, dusty, crowded first impression and wait until the evening air cools to experience the deeper eclectic, sometimes absurd character of one of my favorite cities I've ever lived in. The streets were rarely silent except in the pre-dawn hours or Sunday afternoons. Motorcycles weaved around bumper-to-bumper traffic, often re-routed due to parades and processions. Trucks

with loudspeakers blasted promotions, and food vendors used loud sing-song voices, which became recognizable over time as to who was selling what. Taxi drivers honked relentlessly at the slightest pause in traffic, and buses rumbled at impossible speeds. The smell of cooked meat and exhaust rose to meet the heat blazing down from the sun, leaving tourists lethargic and dripping in sweat. My apartment was tucked away in a small, gated complex on the outskirts of the central commercial plaza. The view out the front gate was of a large striking dark gray cement church that cast shadows around the block as the days crept by.

During my first month in the apartment, I constantly panicked. I tried to focus on learning my new job while troubleshooting the unreliable Internet signal I relied on for my livelihood. Eventually, the signal stabilized enough to let me relax, although I never arrived at total ease with my work. I always felt like someone was going to bust me for what? I don't know. The children I worked with were sweet, but I felt an enormous sense of relief when I made it to the end of the day. Work brought up an incredible amount of dread inside me, but it served a purpose in letting me live in Nicaragua. I planned to work part-time and pursue other interests, like surfing, yoga, and blog writing. I was on my way to living the dream, and as soon as the stress of the new job settled down, I would see what all these struggles had been for. When work was over, I would sit on the footstep of the apartment facing out to the small, shared

cement courtyard and smoke cigarettes and drink Nicaraguan beers until it was late enough to toss and turn in bed, trying not to think about the next day of work.

I met a girl named Ash from the US who had been advertising a room for rent in a shared cooperative-style household just around the corner from my lonely little cave of an apartment. I reached out to her to inquire about their living situation. By the time I had decided to get in touch with her, they had already filled the room, but we chatted and figured out we both did yoga. She said she walked to an evening yoga class at least once a week and invited me to come with her the next time she went.

I'm thankful Ash offered to walk with me to my first yoga class because arriving at the yoga studio was not like arriving at your average yoga studio.

You had to navigate through unfamiliar neighborhoods and wind down dark alleys with chained-up dogs to eventually feel your way through the shadows of a long courtyard and towards the glimmer of a metal staircase that led up to the second-floor studio. The room was one long open space with tag-board covered floors and a tin ceiling. I was surprised at how many people filled the class. Locals, tourists, ex-pats, and study abroad students filed in. Some students were clearly regulars and chatted with the teacher as they unfurled their mats. I was fascinated. The teacher, Donna, was a very tall, husky-looking woman in her early fifties. She had broad shoulders and a lean athletic build, and the bulk of her long blue streaked hair fell over to one side,

which was otherwise shaved. She had basic worn-out stretch pants and a cotton tank top, and I felt relieved to fit right in. It was my style. Scrubby, non-pretentious, and somewhat concerning. Fancy yoga studios with stylish young teachers made me feel like a sinner in the spotlight. The teacher did not have a tender approach, and the class was vigorous. Her aggressive voice and military-style encouragement were tempered by her knowledge and command of the technical side of yoga. She was from Ohio, and she spoke in basic Spanish but pronounced words as if she were speaking English, which made her easy to follow. I laughed out loud a few times during class at her outrageous Spanglish political commentary, which spilled out amid her otherwise rigid Eastern traditional yoga style. She was something to behold. After class, I introduced myself, and she was very friendly and welcoming. I instantly craved her attention and approval as I did most authority figures. Also, I thought if you were a yoga teacher, you were also some kind of spiritually advanced human. Donna noticed and gave me attention, which flattered me, although our relationship would prove rocky. It took me a while to figure out her unpredictable and harsh treatment was less about being spiritually advanced and more about a traumatic brain injury.

Attending yoga classes was the perfect way to make friends and attempt a social life in Nicaragua. The bar scene would have been easiest, but I wasn't interested in going to the bars. Even though I used alcohol regularly to feel OK, I never really liked partying. I wasn't looking for a good time as much as I was looking for relief. I preferred to have a few drinks at home alone. In this way, yoga and drinking went well together and fit my lifestyle. I was resistant to the spiritual aspect of yoga, and I didn't know what 'healing' meant regarding yoga as a healing art. I realized later that while yoga usually felt good, it also stirred up things inside me. It stirred up dormant energies, forgotten stories, and nagging ghosts that I didn't even realize I was pushing down. It makes sense now that I was quick to drink and smoke after a yoga class. I didn't want the buzz to wear off and to start feeling the gremlins. At the time, I didn't know I was pushing things down. I didn't know that the combination of yoga and drinking turned me into a ticking time bomb. I didn't know any of that, and I decided to go to every class I could to stay in shape and to have a social life.

Donna had a Facebook page where she posted her schedule. I knew nothing about the different styles of yoga, so when I saw her announcement for "Bhakti" yoga, I didn't hesitate to go. Before walking up the metal stairs, she saw me and stopped me. She said the class would be in her house instead of the upstairs yoga studio. Her house was a downstairs apartment, and the unfurnished living room was a classroom. I was the first one there, and I rolled out my mat onto her dusty tile floor

and wondered when the others would start arriving. Donna and I chatted, and as the clock ticked ten after, she said,

“Well, it looks like it’s just me, you, and Chispa.” Her stocky drooling hyperactive pug vibrated from the excitement on her lap. Donna’s tender welcome quickly morphed into a militant command, “Chispa, GO LAY DOWN!” He promptly obeyed, and his doggy claws clicked and scratched along the tiles as he scurried out.

Returning to a calm voice, she began to explain how Bhakti yoga was a kind of devotional yoga which didn’t involve poses but instead involved chanting.

Wait. What? Dear God, what? Chanting? No, no, this can’t be happening. My eyes got wide, my stomach curled into itself, and my mind scrambled for a way out. Singing out loud in front of a stranger was one of my worst nightmares coming true, but I couldn’t move or speak. I was frozen. Donna wrote the mantras on a whiteboard and explained their deep spiritual meaning to me before we had to start chanting. Luckily her voice was loud and off-key and completely drowned out any sounds which may or may not have been coming out of my mouth. At one point, Chispa returned to the room and started humping my leg. Donna opened her eyes from her peace chanting. Her face contorted to that of a terrifying army general, “Chispa! Get out of here! Get out of here before I ...” She didn’t have to finish her sentence, and the dog had turned to make a run for it. And so, my journey with yoga in Nicaragua began.

Over the next few months, I settled into a routine of work, yoga, and weekend surfing. I started to make some friends, and things were going well on the outside, although I struggled to escape the feeling of being constantly stressed out. I thought about going home for a few months to re-group, but my friend Natasha had her ticket to visit me for an epic surf adventure, so I held on to her arrival.

Natasha arrived, and when my work week was over, we decided to go to a distant beach town and try to catch some surf there. I had been before and made friends with the surf hostel's yoga instructor and the owners. The surf wasn't great, but we had fun playing in the water, drinking, dancing, doing yoga, and cooking fresh fish feasts. My underlying sense of dread and discomfort plagued me, but I ignored it the best I could and focused on making the most of Natasha's company and getting some great pictures for social media to show I was doing great. When the pain in my stomach started to flare up even more acutely, I took ibuprofen and washed it down with beers. The beer was doing nothing for me, and the discomfort became misery.

I left the beach early to get back to work, and Natasha stayed at the hostel with her newfound friends to catch the incoming swell. On the bus ride home, the pain in my side intensified and became unbearable. The hot, crowded school bus bumped along the dirt road. I hugged my backpack in front of me, closing my eyes and wishing the pain away, but it was only getting worse. I doubled over and put all my energy and concentration on not throwing up because I knew the bus wouldn't stop and I

wouldn't be popular if I puked. It wasn't my period. What was it? It felt like there was a jagged rock in my right ovary. All I could do was groan until I finally made it back to Leon where I could collapse into bed until the pain subsided. I was worried. It was time to go to the doctor yet again. After Natasha left, I went to a gynecologist and the lab results and exam found absolutely nothing wrong with me. They didn't find a thing. No diseases, no cysts, no nothing.

Despite the pain, Natasha's visit was inspiring. It gave me perspective into the life I had created in Leon, and I was proud and appreciated so many things about it. When she left, I felt I had been put back on track, and it renewed my spirit to keep going and not give up.

The bouts of eye-crossing pain were sobering reminders something needed to change. It had to be the drinking that was causing my pain. Maybe now was the time to stop drinking for good. I felt my body screaming at me from deep within, and I didn't know what other change it could be screaming at me to make. I wasn't aware of any unknown variables, such as buried trauma. One evening, I did some journaling and decisively concluded that the drinking was hurting me, and I had to stop. After exhausting all other possibilities for what could be wrong with me, I had my answer. I was weak, and I needed to be stronger and better, the voices born out of a lie told me.

I inhaled deeply and decided to quit drinking and smoking cold turkey. After a few days of enduring the powerful waves of cravings, the storms eventually calmed, but something else started emerging. While I was lying in bed at night, my mind began to grab onto little threads of messages sprouting up from a distant place within me. I would lie quietly in bed for hours, all alone, unable to sleep, putting all my energy and concentration on making out what these messages were. What were they trying to tell me? What was down there inside me, trying to tell me something? My mind would scan through memories and reach and reach to try to grasp whatever it was reaching back up at me. I had anxiety. I had addiction issues. I scratched and picked at my skin and nails until they bled. I had body image issues. I had ghost pain in my pelvic area. I had multiple horrific sexual encounters with men. I had several accidents while blacked out.

What was wrong with me? After a series of sleepless nights, I finally landed on something. I was getting the message that there may have been sexual abuse in my childhood. I strained, trying to remember something. I realized I had very little recollection of anything from my childhood besides playing outside with neighbors, visits with my aunt, some flashes of being at school, memories of one birthday party, and some faint memories of opening Christmas presents. I allowed the possibility of sexual abuse to enter my mind, and I wasn't troubled by it, merely curious. I just wanted answers, and I wanted to move on. The thing which kept popping up in my

mind's eye wasn't a memory but a thought about one of my cousins, who had been a good friend. I wasn't sure what age I was when I stopped seeing him, but I remembered a falling out between his parents and mine. Why did they stop talking, I wondered? I had never asked. Maybe the sexual abuse was related to my uncle or cousins, and it is why our parents stopped talking?

Tossing and turning in bed, I strained to try to remember anything. I didn't get any yucky feelings when I thought about my cousin. In fact, quite the opposite. He may have understood me more than the others, but I couldn't make out a single memory. I decided to call my sister Emily and ask her if she knew anything.

“Hey Em, It's Megan”

“Heyyyy, sis! How's it going, siss?” She said in a half whine like speaking to a baby animal.

“Oh, it's fine, it's good. I'm just lying here thinking of something weird. Can I ask you something bizarre?”

“Uhh yeah, of course,” she said, anticipating gossip.

“Soooo, I have been having this feeling maybe there was some kind of sexual abuse in my childhood. Em, I have all the symptoms. You know? The only thing I can

think of is something with our cousins. Do you know of anything that happened with our cousins?”

“Ummm, that’s not crazy, and yes, I do remember Megan. There was all sorts of weird stuff”. She said casually as if it was well known

“Seriously?” This was brand new and shocking to me

“Oh yeah, and you know my friend Ramie? Her dad was sexually abusing her, and there was all sorts of weird stuff. I always felt ewww when I went to her house”.

My mind had already started spinning away from her words as I tried to match this new information with the threads reaching up from the dark within me like little hands looking for something to grasp onto.

“Oh, gosh, oh, sad” I tried to stay focused on what she was saying.

“OK, hmm, well, maybe that is what all this is; I just want to know what is wrong with me.”

“Sis, we are all fucked up,” she said, laughing the kind of laugh that makes something severe and sad seem normal.

I laughed with her, but my mind kept searching.

“Okkkayy, sis, anyways, how are you? How are the girls?”

“We are great, you know, stressful, everything is stressful, but we are great.”

“Alright sissy, well I better go, thanks for talking to me.”

“Okkkkayy sissss, I love you”

“Love you, sis.”

I got off the phone and told myself this must be it, and I would put it behind me. It didn't seem like that big of a deal. Maybe it was just kids being kids, and I took it harder than most. The most important thing was I had quit drinking, and now I knew this piece of the puzzle, and I could move on. This would be my fresh start.

That night I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. The next day I had a full day of online speech sessions scheduled, but I was filled with dread and struggled to concentrate. I just wanted to zone out. I squirmed in my chair and in between sessions I would scroll Instagram for some semblance of numbing relief as the clock ticked by in slow motion. When the last session was over, it took everything in my power to not go buy a beer. I had planned a trip to a yoga hostel in the mountains. If I could hold on till morning, I would be on my way to a detoxifying weekend and spiritual transformation. I hoped. I hoped the time had arrived for me to receive a lasting, blissful revelation. I would find the answer in the yoga hostel.

The following day, coffee tied me over as the waves of craving peaked and dissipated but never entirely subsided. I walked outside my gated apartment complex and hailed down the first cab driving by. He dropped me at the bus station, and half a day later, I arrived at the doorsteps of the hostel, feeling as if I was about to be discovered by a great sage. I didn't feel as well as I would have liked for such an auspicious weekend. My stomach felt a wave of dull but constant nausea, and my heart raced.

I attended an evening yoga class taught by the stylish young woman who owned the hostel. She was perfectly put together, with long silky black hair, designer yoga clothes, and crystal mandala beads hanging around her neck. She must be so healthy and so pure, I thought. The class was slow and basic, and I ignored my disappointment. She was so pretty and spoke so sweetly, but she didn't seem too deep.

The half-hour class was not satisfying. I showered and took myself out to dinner. I went to an American-owned restaurant and ordered lasagna. Still, I couldn't finish eating it because of the discomfort in my belly. My energy seemed so thin, and I hadn't recovered my sense of concentration since talking with my sister. The case was closed, but I hadn't felt right since. The next day I joined another yoga class at the hostel taught by a young man who talked a mile a minute and was clearly a contortionist, not a teacher. He pretzeled his body in every possible formation and paid very little attention to the students in the class. One couple walked out after five

minutes, and others bumped into each other as they fell out of poses. It was a circus. About halfway through the class, I heard a giant thump behind me as a large man fell out of a headstand. I looked back to check on him, and he was grinning, and I burst into laughter.

The teacher asked me what was so funny.

I gathered my composure and apologized. I told him it must have been the nostril breathing that sent me into a laughing fit.

After the class, I admitted that this wasn't the mystical experience I had hoped for. I was feeling worse by the minute. I had sworn to myself I wouldn't drink and could not give in, so I just tossed and turned and told myself, just like every doctor ever had, that it was nothing.

The next day after the disappointing weekend and a long hot bus ride back to my apartment, I arrived home too late to get dinner. I didn't have anything in my refrigerator, and I was starving. I walked down the street to see if any of the little restaurants or shops were open, but it was Sunday night, and the streets were dead. I returned home, opened my fridge again, and took out some precooked ground beef.

It didn't smell right, but I was desperate, so I made a plate of nachos and went to bed. A few hours later I woke up, ran to the bathroom, and spent the rest of the

night and into the morning hours throwing up bile. The next day, I couldn't move. My face was tinted green, I couldn't eat anything, and my head pounded like a jackhammer. I figured it was food poisoning and just needed to let it run. After a week, I still wasn't quite right. After two weeks, I began getting dizzy. I finally went to the doctor and for once, they found something. I had parasites and according to everyone I talked to, parasites were normal and inevitable in Nicaragua. I needed to take an anti-parasite medicine. I was told many Nicaraguans take them twice yearly, at least to be safe. I took the medication and started to feel better, but I could never eat meat again, and I decided I wasn't ready to quit drinking after all. Whatever was stirring around, nagging at me, would just have to stay hidden. I couldn't deal with it. I returned to drinking less and adding more yoga and surfing to counteract the ill effects of drinking.

I learned there would be a yoga teacher training by Donna, the yoga czar, which would take place over the weekends for several weeks. I had never seriously considered yoga teacher training, but the schedule and the price were right, and I couldn't think of a reason not to do it. It fell in my lap. I felt unworthy but decided to express my interest in the training to Donna. To my surprise and relief, she was enthusiastic about my joining. She explained that to prepare for the training, I would have to start coming to the Ashtanga class, which was a class I avoided on the schedule because of its name after the Bhakti debacle. Since then, I have stuck to

classes with straightforward titles like power yoga and gentle yoga. I told her I wasn't familiar with Ashtanga, and she said to come to the beginner class, and I could work my way up to the advanced class. I attended the Ashtanga class, and it blew my mind. It was a physically challenging, probably the most difficult class I'd ever been to, and I loved it because I am an insatiable appetite for intensity. I still consider myself more of an athlete than a yogi. The physical rigor made me more confident I could be a yoga teacher. My athleticism made up for the fact that I wasn't godly and didn't know anything about the spiritual stuff. I quickly advanced and began to memorize the poses, which were the same every time. The way to progress seemed concrete and it made sense to me. I pictured myself being a yoga teacher who would shun the spiritual rigidity and pretentiousness of the practice. I would welcome the lower-class sinners who weren't just trying to look good and act all woke and superior. However, I also pictured myself looking really good as I did this. I didn't see the irony, and I couldn't see my own shadowy aspects of my fantasies.

The yoga teacher training occurred in Donna's windowless apartment, which was hot and dusty. Her knowledge of the technical and historical side of yoga was immense, but her uncontrollable tangents into conspiracy theories and underlying anger at the world distorted the experience. I thought it would be a restorative and inspirational retreat, and I was let down. By the end of the training, I felt like a caged feral animal, and I could barely tolerate attending her lectures. Her ramblings wore on

my patience, and despite her intentions, her mentorship turned dysfunctional. Donna and I had a strained and unhealthy relationship. I didn't know how to navigate it, and I vented my anger by talking about her behind her back. It wasn't pretty and didn't feel good. I went through what felt like yoga boot camp hell and became a certified instructor.

During the training, I met a woman named Bianca who was born and raised in Leon. She was a feminist scholar, and a former university professor turned lawyer. She was also a dedicated yoga practitioner who, like me, could drink like a fish and chain smoke over long talks about everything, but politics, which I steered clear of. We shared a love for many subjects but were also quite different. She came from old money and was guarded, discerning, and highly productive. She could take or leave alcohol when wished, and I could not. She also did unexpected things, like inviting me over to sip fancy tequila straight-up out of tumblers in the middle of the day. She had jet-black eyes and a raw and irreverent sense of humor, making me throw my head back laughing. She became my best friend in Leon.

Shortly after the yoga training ended, Donna moved back to the US. She left her yoga studio, a small non-profit business, to us students. We were a newly trained batch of yoga teachers from around the world. We were a German scientist, a Norwegian college student, a Canadian artist, a Nicaraguan housewife, a couple of French hostel owners, me, and another American college student. I enthusiastically offered my

support and willing participation in keeping the yoga community alive. Our meetings were drawn-out fragmented multi-lingual meanderings that went nowhere. Yet, somehow, we managed to put ourselves on the schedule and keep the business going.

Ash, the young woman who lived around the corner from me, let me know that a room had opened up in their housing cooperative and this time I jumped on it and decided to move out of the little apartment.

My new housemates were a mix of students and non-profit workers from Europe and the US. It was not a party house, and I was the heaviest drinker. I constantly beat myself up over the drinking, despite the fact I would usually just have a few beers to relax enough to try to fall asleep. I also started teaching yoga classes on the weekend, and I drank more when there were beach parties.

I did have a few nights in Leon where I don't remember bits and pieces, but luckily, I didn't sleep with anyone or get in any more accidents. Sleeping with people was never an addiction. It wasn't something I felt I needed or wanted, but rather more of something that just happened to me. I was trying hard to back off from drinking, and as my yoga practice increased, my tolerance for alcohol seemed to decrease. However, the restlessness and pain inside me became more aggravated.

The cooperative house was a large old colonial house with a wild plant-filled courtyard and an open-air kitchen. It had four small bedrooms, cold shower

bathrooms, and an overgrown backyard. The house was a little messy, with an eclectic mix of old mismatched furniture and a large old kitchen with grime so deep in its crevices that there was no way to clean it. I wasn't used to being in an environment that didn't orbit around things looking perfect. I wasn't sure if I would be able to function in an environment that revolved around healthy relationships instead of an image, but I wanted so badly to be the type of person who could.

Ash, who was the heart and brains of the house, was soft-spoken and nurturing but also wise and quietly fierce. She came from an upper-class East Coast family and worked long hours for a local non-profit. Her boyfriend Tim was from England, and they had met in Leon and were madly in love without ever putting their romance on display. Tim was interested in photography, surfing, and other outdoor pursuits. Our other roommate Maria was part Texan and part Dominican and was an intelligent, nerdy, deceptively gorgeous introvert with a huge heart for justice. She worked at a non-profit as well. Her nose would scrunch up against her glasses, and she would giggle when amused. She was also under-spoken, but far from sheepish. Other housemates came and went during my time there.

Some were students studying abroad, some were backpackers, and some were long-lost wanderers. Ash pioneered the idea of community-style living and shared meals. I was so nervous about cooking for others because I had never learned to cook, and food, to me, was something you tried your best not to eat. Food equals fat.

Fat equals the end of the world. This was the unspoken message in my house growing up. I wanted to change this. I was also nervous about sharing. It was easy for me to give, but it was nearly impossible for me to receive. Some part of me knew I needed to try. I felt this heavy door inside me that had swelled shut trying to budge open.

On my first night cooking, I started nervously chopping at one in the afternoon for a seven pm dinner. By the time the sun was setting behind the tall cement wall of our garden, all open kitchen surfaces were covered with dripping pans and half-chopped veggies. Multiple pans were going on the gas stove when Tim rolled in, relaxed as a river otter to peer around at what was cooking.

“Can I give you a hand?” He asked as he opened the fridge, whistling

My heart raced, and I darted from one area and back to another, dropping a trail of dribbles and bits with each pass.

“Ummmmm, I don’t know. Umm huh, umm, what do you think?” I didn’t stop moving

“Let me give you a hand. ” he insisted as he slyly checked the oven. The oven! What had I put in there?

“I’m just going to turn this down a bit,” he said kindly.

“Yesss!” I shouted. “Yeah, OK, oh God, yes, thank you. Shoot, shit, God” I stood still for a moment in the middle of the chaos, closed my eyes, put a fake smile on my face, and took a deep breath.

“OK, yes, you can help. That would be great,” I said calmly before scanning the kitchen again while fighting to overcome the desire to prove I could handle it myself.

“Yes, so umm, thank you so much” My heart started to race again. “How about you? Ummm, I don’t know. OK, can you check the cabbage and get it ready to start rolling?”

“On it!” He whistled as he pulled the steamed cabbage off the stove and over to the sink. I carried on flitting from here to there, while Tim cleaned up after me assuring me it would be great. By the time the stuffed cabbage rolls were ready, I had slumped into the chair and barely had an appetite from the beers I had drank, the sweat, and the Olympic-level stress I felt to cook a meal others would eat.

“This is delicious, Megan. Wow, I’m impressed, seriously,” Ash said as she chewed bites of stuffed cabbage.

“Oh, come on, it’s alright. Thanks to Tim for saving the day.”

“No, it was all you,” he protested.

“Ahh, thanks, guys. Phew, I’ll get better”. Punching myself in the gut as I speak.

As the months went by, my cooking skills didn’t exactly get better but seemed to morph into waves of small successes and medium-sized failures. I dealt with my excitement and disappointment in the same way. Beers. Beers were the solution, except I was always mad at myself for drinking beer. Some people might feel frustrated reading this and ask, why didn’t you stop drinking? I couldn’t. If you could stop, it wouldn’t be an addiction. Besides, I wasn’t ready. Looking back, I wasn’t prepared to face what was inside me. I don’t think I would have survived.

“It is what you need right now, Megan,” Ash would rock me gently with her nonjudgmental words. I felt myself ease up on the internal punching in the arms of rare compassion. As the weeks and months went by, I felt more comfortable and like I belonged in a healthy household. I still dreaded work, but I loved our evening dinners, teaching and practicing yoga, and weekends spent at the beach surfing.

One evening I was riding my rickety bike down one of the cobble streets to teach a yoga class and time seemed to slow down enough to notice something. The bike cruised and bumped along, and my head turned towards the sky. There were banners of colorful flags zig zagging overhead, dancing in the gentle breeze. The sunset had warmed the sky soft pink and orange, and I felt, for an elongated moment in time,

happy. Living with kind, nonjudgmental humans allowed my heavily bolted door to budge. The light was peeking through the slightest crack.

Chapter 12 – Flee

The wind had shifted in Leon by April, and the dry season arrived. The temperatures were peaking. To stay calm and preserve energy in the oppressive heat, my body would slow down to a near stop in the hottest part of the afternoon. If I hurried ahead thoughtlessly and forced too much activity, I would become lethargic. I continued my online work with kids, and between sessions, I would lie on my bed, which was right next to my desk, with a fan on full blast. It didn't stop the sweat. Sometimes I would take a cold shower to get temporary relief from the thick swallows of hot air. I tried to stay engaged and animated during the live speech therapy sessions. Still, it was difficult to concentrate in the heat. My desk looked out the door of my bedroom into the garden, and the sounds of birds, street noises, traffic, and my housemates walking by floated through the open-air house and into the background noise, which made it harder to hear the kids, but closing the door would have created a sauna. I wore a casual business top and cotton pajama pants rolled up to my knees. I would drink a Coke once I had finished my morning coffee to stay awake in the afternoons. My laptop was becoming so hot in the afternoons I worried it might explode. The nagging restlessness continued to rise inside me with the temperatures. I was doing everything I could to keep my cool physically and emotionally - if there is a difference between the two. I felt like flames were about to erupt inside and outside of

me. It was mid-April, and the academic year would end in June, just a few months away. I planned to return to the US for the summer to visit family and friends, and I started thinking it might be best to leave the heat of Nicaragua early than I had planned.

I thought I could head home in early May instead of late June and finish out my work year at my parent's house. Yes, that is what I would do. I wanted to continue living in Leon, but I needed to clear my head and escape the heat.

I bought a plane ticket to fly home at the beginning of May. In the meantime, I decided to head to the mountains for a long weekend away from the city to find some cooler air and gather my composure.

I made reservations at a hostel, which from the photos, looked like a cool misty retreat set up against a lush green jungle-covered hillside. I couldn't wait to get out of town.

I never made it to the mountains. By the time the weekend rolled around, all routes to and from major cities were blocked with barricades. The country erupted into chaos, protests, violence, and flames. As the saying goes, as above, so below, and as within, so without. It started to feel viscerally true. I felt like a volcano ready to erupt, and the tension within me had grown progressively. In a blink of an eye, the world outside of me exploded. A national political crisis and uprising against violent government oppression were underway. I had known very little about world history

and almost nothing about Nicaraguan history or politics.

In the initial crisis unfolding, I tried to minimize the situation, explain it away, push it down, and turn a blind eye. I rolled my blind eyes as thousands of Nicaraguans were about to flood the streets in protest of the tyrannical government. I felt I had learned my lesson with Danny and the jail saga. I didn't want to involve myself in other people's affairs and put myself in harm's way for situations I didn't understand. My experience with Danny jaded me from feeling the gravity and the tragedy of what was happening. I blocked it out and tried to go on with my business. Besides bouts of debilitating pain, my life story was going according to plan, and I wouldn't let anything mess it up. I was annoyed my trip to the mountains was canceled as stray AK-47 bullets rattled the walls of houses of sleeping children in the capital city. I just needed to escape from all of it and ignore the darkness. Become ignorant.

The night the crisis erupted in the Southern part of the country, my friend Bianca and I made plans to meet me at our usual spot for beers. This was the evening before the violence descended directly upon Leon. For the moment, the chaos was centralized in the capital city and was spreading East to West below us. The fact that she met with me that evening when her country was on the verge of disaster seems to me now a miracle. The restaurant we met at was one of Leon's oldest. It was on a corner, along a wall of fortress-like traditional colonial buildings lining the block. In Leon, you couldn't tell the difference between houses and businesses just by looking

unless you spotted a small sign or the doors were opened to see inside. Of course, the locals knew what and who was behind each door. The restaurant had giant wooden doors that opened to the street during business hours. It had high ceilings and large cobble square tile floors. The restaurant was on our way home from the yoga studio, so Bianca and I would often stop there on our way home from class and order beers and frijolitos, upgraded chips, and refried bean dip. Beer and frijolitos had become a ritual. Bianca had known the owners of the restaurant her whole life.

On the eve of the crisis, the restaurant's atmosphere was tense. Although Bianca had always shown near-endless patience for my ignorance, she hit her limit that evening. She was in the beginning stages of processing a terrifying and life-altering event, and I had taken a very privileged stance. I said I wouldn't stoop so low to get involved in protests. I don't remember the exchange of words or how the conversation ended, but it was the first time in our relationship that I felt we veered from one another. I blamed her. I thought she was overreacting and bringing me down, and I wrote her off as less aware than I was. We finished our beer and said a strained and awkward goodbye before parting ways. We didn't know it would be the last time we would see each other for a long time.

I walked home briskly along the eerily quiet streets. My head was spinning with arguments about how I was right, although the heavy shift in the atmosphere of Leon was palpable. When I arrived home, the long dark corridor to the kitchen was pitch

black, but the light was on, and I could see my housemates huddled around the dining room table. I went towards them to see what they were doing, and Maria explained she had bought a little television. They were trying to follow the national news to verify the stories of the quickly spreading chaos flooding their Facebook feeds. I told my housemates how Bianca and I had gotten into a fight and that I thought everyone was overreacting. I was searching for validation that I was right and that the whole situation was being blown out of proportion. Nobody knew what to say or make of all that was happening. When I tried to lie down to sleep, my mind spun out of control, wanting to explain myself further to Bianca. I tossed and turned, sweating in the relentless heat, before getting up and trying to write her a long email defending my point of view. It took me a couple of hours to work out my argument. Still, ultimately, I never got anywhere, and I never sent the email. By morning, my heart raced, and tears wouldn't stop running down my cheeks. The crisis still appeared very distant from me, but my mind had run out of arguments about why it had nothing to do with me. I canceled my reservations at the mountain hostel but decided to go to the beach instead. Nobody at the beach took the situation seriously, and I became more distressed with each passing moment. I didn't sleep again that night, and by morning, I called Bianca and asked for forgiveness for my ignorance, and I asked her what she thought I should do.

Leave the country now before it's too late to get out. She advised.

This time I listened to her. I changed my flight and got the first plane ticket out of Nicaragua the next day.

I told my housemates I had decided to buy a ticket and fly home. They also knew and trusted Bianca and took her advice seriously. We were all confused and scared. After much discussion, we decided to fly back to the US and wait things out until the situation calmed down or we had a better handle on what was happening. We bought tickets to leave the very next day.

It was 3:30 am when my alarm went off. My eyes were closed, but I had just barely drifted into a half-sleep. I was up all night glued to my phone, texting friends and watching horror stories flooding in on social media. There were reports and videos of street fighting, gunfire, burning buildings, and armed para-militia patrols and attacks. It was surreal. I drifted out of bed into the eerie morning silence, interrupted only by a single bird singing beautifully. The peaceful and reliable melody seemed out of place as the world spun out of control. I walked barefoot down the dusty tile-covered corridor to the kitchen. Our tabby cat, ignoring me since we met, walked right up to me. I squatted down and put my head to hers, waiting for her to cry for breakfast. She just purred. I sat with her momentarily, saying my goodbyes, as she burrowed her head into me. Tears started dripping down again. I made coffee but had no appetite and couldn't eat anything. My housemates were beginning to stir, and once everyone was awake, we didn't really speak the only noises were the fridge opening and closing, the

toilet flushing, the shuffling of feet as we packed, and suitcases zipping.

When the taxi arrived, we opened the door to the darkened, deserted street and a very nervous taxi driver. He told us to put everything in the trunk and only carry a few dollars if we were stopped. He said if we were stopped or attacked, give the attackers the money and tell them that is all we have. I started to sob. Tim expertly and gently demanded I stay calm. We set off on our way out of Leon. The streets were littered with rocks, homemade barricades, and broken glass. The taxi driver feared the worst as we made our way out onto the highway. We headed towards the capital city, Managua. The US embassy had reported that as of 8:00 pm the night before, all the roads to the airport had been blocked. We had no idea if we would make it. We drove along, calculating the risks and debating routes. My roommate called acquaintances living in towns along the way to see if they could give us the status of what was coming up. All reports were that the roads were clear. We kept going, passing the occasional smoldering fire in the street. The sun finally started to rise as we neared the city.

The deeper we went into the country's capital, the more nervous the taxi driver became. He explained most taxi drivers were refusing to work, especially transporting Americans. I didn't know why he was saying these things, but it didn't help me to stay calm. I bit my nails and craved the moment I could have a cigarette. As we approached the most contentious area of Managua, he started to become so nervous

he started talking about dropping us off on the side of the road. Tim stayed calm and called a taxi driver to follow us, just in case. We made it to the airport without incident and paid both taxi drivers.

Tim and I were on the same flight. We said a teary goodbye to the others. As we boarded the flight, the first feelings of conflict about my decision to leave started to seep in. Was this the right decision? Were we abandoning the country and our local friends? Were we overreacting? Should we have waited it out? We were settling in our seats, and someone called out loudly, "Viva Nicaragua!" and the entire cabin responded,

"Viva Nicaragua" and then he called, "Estamos un pueblo unido!" We are a people united. A muffled response from a few people faded to silence. We were all leaving. Our heads hung low.

Chapter 13 -Forced Home

In the Pacific Northwest, the mid-April temperatures lingered in the low 60's, which felt freezing. When I arrived at my parent's house, I couldn't get warm, and it was almost impossible to concentrate on work. All I thought about was Nicaragua. I checked my messages and social media every few minutes for weeks to see what was happening. I posted everything I could to raise awareness about the situation, but life in the US went on as usual. Nobody understood, and nothing I was doing was helping. I wanted the whole world to stop and all hands-on deck. I wanted a solution to ancient cyclical patterns of tyranny, and I wanted it now. My ego was so inflated I thought I should be able to save the world. The guilt of being ignorant and the longing to be redeemed were all mixed up with everything else swirling and bubbling within me. I wrote to former colleagues from the news station to try to get them to cover the story. I participated in podcasts and tried to raise money. I wanted to shake everyone and make them understand people were suffering unjustly! We had to do something! Wake up, wake up, wake up out there! Life in the US went on as usual, and nobody seemed to understand. I thought I had woken up and needed everybody else to wake up right that second. My frustration with the world was reaching uncharted territory.

After about a month of working from my parent's house, I crawled out of my skin with boredom, aggravation, and despair. Sara, my adventure buddy from graduate school, had just bought a giant house in our college town with her new fiance, and they said I could stay with them. I didn't want to intrude, but I felt desperate to be anywhere but at my parent's house. I mainly wanted to drink and smoke and get some fucking relief. I desperately needed relief. The pain in my side seemed to be getting worse, also.

I arrived at the hillside mini-mansion, and the newly engaged first-time homeowners were on cloud nine and were ready to party. They busied themselves, getting ready to go camping. I could not take my eyes away from Facebook and my chat groups from Nicaragua. I sat on a bar stool in their kitchen, which looked out onto a lush green forest. My eyes darted as I scrolled, and I would catch myself holding my breath. I wanted the world to be completely opposite of what it was. I was resisting everything that was happening with all the will I had left.

Sara had met her fiancé, Chad, shortly after graduate school, which was right on her schedule. He was from a large conservative family, like mine, although he was one of many boys. Sara told me she had found the male version of me, which later I would realize was no compliment. At the time, what she said was true, but he had more in common with my father than with me. He had an average athletic build, dark

salt-sprinkled hair, and olive skin. He even resembled my father. Chad and I both drank way too much and were always trying to use our willpower to stop.

Like my mom, Sara wasn't a big drinker. The drinking concerned her, but she had such a fierce sense of loyalty to her loved ones that her devotion gave you a sense of freedom because we could get away with anything, and we knew she would never leave.

The two love birds were practically leaping around the house with giddiness as I sat hunched over my phone, biting my nails. They were getting ready to head up to the mountains to go camping and wanted me to join them.

I was chatting with my Leon roommate Ash, who was now staying with her parents on the East Coast since leaving Nicaragua. Tim returned to Leon after a short stay in the US, but the crisis continued to escalate, and he decided it was best to get another plane ticket and return to England, where he was from. Ash and Tim would have to be apart for now. Ash had called me because Tim was trying to leave Leon and get to the airport again, and he was having difficulty getting out of the city. She was in distress. The last she had heard from him, he was on foot and was trying to walk around armed checkpoints and barricades to get to the highway and try to hail a taxi or hitchhike a ride to the airport. I tried to calm her, but I was also panicking. As I talked to her, I was also aware of Chad and Sara filling a cooler with beer. The thought

of having beers by a river sounded so good, but I couldn't pretend this crisis wasn't happening. I had learned my lesson. Famous last words. I got off the phone with Ash and told them I needed to stay home because I didn't want to go out of phone service while Tim was in danger, and I wanted to be available for Ash. They looked at me with disbelief.

“Megan, you have to come. We have been planning this. It will be so much fun”. My stomach knotted. They really wanted me to come. I was their guest, and they let me stay in their fancy new house, and I had nothing to offer them. They would be so disappointed in me if I chose my new friends over them. I couldn't bear it. I hadn't learned my lesson, and I left my friend in crisis and went camping.

As we wound our way up the mountain, I lost phone service. I should have stayed with Ash until Tim was safe. I went against what I knew was right. Ash understood, and when I got back, she let me know Tim had made it to the airport eventually. It wasn't about that; it was about being there for her in crisis. I pushed my guilt down. Camping was fun for a couple of hours. We sat on giant boulders in a sparkling stream, and when I cracked that first cold beer, the light was streaming through the giant trees, hitting my face with warmth. I closed my eyes and felt relief. By evening, the familiar dark fog had arrived. We stayed by the fire, drinking until all the beers were gone. After a restless night of tossing and turning, I woke up in the morning with a headache, dry mouth, and emptiness inside.

After staying with Chad and Sara for a week, they asked me to move in, and I accepted. My online work was winding down for the school year and summer was just around the corner. I didn't want to return to my parent's house, so I figured staying with them would be temporary before I returned to Nicaragua.

There were only a few weeks left of work for the year, but I struggled to get through my days. I didn't sleep well at night. I would toss and turn all night and fall asleep just before my alarm went off in the morning, and then I would sleep until the very last minute before my first session started. I would roll out of bed, wear a decent shirt, and go straight to the computer. I was half asleep all day, but my eyes refused to close when the sun went down. I craved coffee and cigarettes throughout the day to wake me up. Still, they were only making me feel nauseous and jittery. Once the day was over, I couldn't resist the allure of wine. I wanted so desperately to sleep. Alcohol wasn't providing the relief it once had, but it was better than nothing. The pain in my right ovary had become constant and unbearable.

Something had to give. I made an appointment at Planned Parenthood to try to get help. I just wanted them to get whatever was in there out of me. I wanted it out. I wouldn't let them tell me nothing was wrong this time.

I was, again, sitting rigidly on a vinyl medical table covered in a thin tissue that rustled when I moved. The nurse walked in, sat down with her chart in hand, and asked me what was happening.

“I am in so much pain. I have been in pain for so long and had ultrasounds and gynecological exams. I have been to acupuncture, and nobody can ever find anything wrong, but I know something is wrong. There is something in there, and I want it taken out.”

I was so determined and desperate.

The nurse sighed.

“Well, Megan. Look, I have reviewed your chart, and I can tell you that we can rule out several things. It would have shown up on the ultrasound if it was a cyst. We know it isn’t an STD because you have been tested, and we would see it. You don’t have any underlying health issues. You have been doing yoga and acupuncture and working hard to figure out what this is; sometimes, we just don’t know where the pain is coming from. I know that isn’t the answer you want to hear. I just think you need a break from this pain.”

Tears welled up, and I gasped,

“Yes.” God, please, a break. “Yes, I just want a break.”

“What I would suggest for now, just for now, to give your body a rest is trying a low dose birth control.”

She could see the disappointment on my face.

“I really don’t want to be on birth control. It has never agreed with me. It doesn’t feel right to me. I want to get to the root of this. It doesn’t make sense. If there is nothing wrong, then why would I need a pill? You know what I am saying?”
Why didn’t anyone fucking get it? I could lose my mind.

“I get that. I really do”. She sighed as if she did know. I wish I had an answer for you. I think, for now, you just need a break.”

“Is that the only way?”

“It is the best way I can help you today” Her eyes were filled with compassion.

“OK, I’ll try it.”

“Megan, the one thing is you have to quit smoking. It does not mix well with birth control, and at your age, it increases your risk for stroke. It is essential to quit”.

“I will. I have been trying to quit. I can quit. I can quit today. I promise” And I did, and I never smoked again.

After starting birth control, the pain in my right side disappeared almost immediately. I was so excited. I thought it was a miracle. I was on my way to getting on the right track. I had quit smoking, which made drinking less appealing also. Work was the only thing left, causing me anxiety. I just needed to hold on a few more weeks until summer break, and everything would be better. I would fly back to Nicaragua and return to making my dreams come true.

The sleepless nights continued, and the dread of work didn't lessen but instead increased and quickly escalated into debilitating anxiety. Maybe I was anxious because I was hanging onto a profession I didn't enjoy for the money? I wasn't living my purpose, and my body was angry at me. That was it. I was settling for what was easy. I had to get out of speech therapy altogether. Speech therapy was great for many reasons, but my body and soul were screaming at me for change. I wanted to listen. I wanted to be on the right track.

Nicaragua's situation continued to worsen, as did my work situation. As the clock ticked by each day, the days became more challenging to endure. I had to cancel sessions and take days off. One afternoon I logged onto a meeting with parents and teachers, and I didn't know which kid we were meeting about. My mind shut down completely, and as I was talking, my words became scrambled, and I couldn't detect what I was saying. The others in the meeting didn't say anything and acted as if they didn't notice anything was wrong. I quickly and awkwardly ended the discussion. I

slammed the computer shut and fell to my knees. My mind was frozen, and I couldn't breathe. I curled up in the fetal position, unable to think or move. After a while, I started to thaw, and the sobs came. I was having my first panic attack. I couldn't do one more minute of speech therapy. I had to resign, but a resignation would mean I likely wouldn't be going back to Nicaragua, and I longed to go back. It had felt like home. I couldn't keep going one more second the way I was going. The job was the only thing left to blame. I had to quit my job now. I had to get better.

My supervisor had been like a fairy godmother throughout my trials and tribulations. We were independent contractors, so there wasn't any weird pressure to work if you didn't want to. They just found other people to pick up the hours. She was a wonderful person and cared more that I was OK.

When I told her I wasn't doing well and needed to resign, she supported me completely.

I felt some relief from quitting on the spot, although it was quickly replaced by the stress of what I would do next. Ideas started forming. I didn't have much time. I had already burned through my savings and had started using my credit cards again since being home. I decided to look for a waitressing job. I needed to swallow my pride and do whatever it took to improve.

In the meantime, Natasha had been talking about going on a surf trip to Tahiti for a while. She had a friend living on a sailboat with his wife and young daughter, and he had told her she could come on the boat anytime. Natasha had recently left her husband, and with her newfound freedom, she started taking the idea of Tahiti seriously. I had just quit my job and had no idea what I was doing with my life when Natasha called me and brought up the idea of Tahiti.

“Would you come with me, Megan?”

“You are serious, aren’t you? Holy Shit, Tash, I dunno.”

“Megan Conrad said we could come this summer, and he would only charge us a few hundred dollars for food. All we would need is the ticket.”

“Jesus, Oh my God. It isn’t exactly great timing money-wise, but it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“Exactly, Megan. Come on! Let’s do it. I’m serious. I’m going. How awesome would it be to make this trip together? Finally, get barreled?”

“Ha, right? Jesus, this would be like...like everything. Jesus, OK, before we get too excited, let’s look at tickets.”

“Yay, oh my god, OK, let’s meet up tonight, and we can look.”

“Oh, Jeez. OK, sounds good.”

I started recovering bits and shards of the surfing dream which had brought me to Nicaragua in the first place. Maybe the story wasn't over. Perhaps this would be the turning point. Maybe Tahiti would be the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Later that night, Natasha and I met up at a bar, and after a couple beers, we pulled the trigger and bought our tickets. They were a couple thousand dollars, almost all the funds I had left on my credit cards. We were over the moon. I don't think I had ever been so excited in my life. I had quit my job, quit smoking, I was drinking less and now we were going on a surf trip to Tahiti. The Nicaragua crisis raged on, but somehow this was going to be the thing that made everything better.

It didn't take me long to find a summer job. A local winery which also had a high-end restaurant attached hired me on the spot. I told them I would be gone for three weeks of the summer to go to Tahiti. They said they would give me the job if I was willing to be an assistant server, which was a fancy way of saying busser. I accepted. The winery sat at the top of a steep hillside, covered in vineyards and fields of bright purple lavender flowers. A giant tower reached towards the sky adding to the regal feeling of the estate. It was a far cry from Nicaragua. I was insecure about returning to waiting tables since having a master's degree, but the insecurity didn't last long. Some servers had their Ph.D. There were musicians, single parents, flower farmers, and every other type of person working there. The head servers made

hundreds of dollars daily and felt no shame in what they did. In fact, the server positions were highly competitive and considered prestigious. The atmosphere turned out to be just about as ruthless as the news station.

I only had to work at the restaurant for a few weeks before we left for Tahiti. I had forgotten how grueling waiting tables were. I would get home close to one am and barely be able to peel off the black pants, wriggle off the necktie, and unbutton the stained white shirt, before passing out cold. At least I could finally sleep a little. I started thinking about exploring a public relations job in the wine industry. Maybe I did want to be rich and fancy. Maybe I needed to find a husband, buy a house, be normal, and have a shiny life like everyone else. I couldn't do anything about the world's problems anyways.

One afternoon I was opening the patio with another server's assistant, who seemed a little less ruthless than most others. He had a long dark ponytail and played the drums in a reggae band.

"How do you like working at such a fancy place?" I asked as I filled up water pitchers.

"Ha! You think this place is fancy??" He laughed as he knocked his fist on the tower wall. The hollow echo of the surprisingly thin wall reverberated up the tower.

“Fake! It’s all fake! It’s like the McDonald’s of fine dining.”

I threw my head back and laughed. The meaning of his message to me was clear as a bell. I was again reminded that I was not meant to live a life that looked shiny on the outside but was hollow on the inside.

The key to finding my soul and my purpose would be in Tahiti.

Chapter 14 - Tahiti

It was my first time in the Southern Hemisphere and on a sailboat. I had many expectations for this trip to Tahiti. It was where all the disappointments I had suffered would make sense and seem worth it. I thought it would be an ending to a sad story and the beginning of a happy one. I didn't have any idea that I had only hit the tip of the iceberg when it came to an understanding of the meaning of the word suffering.

The 30-foot sailboat was very well-kept but not fancy. I imagined sailboats as luxurious, so I was relieved it was casual. It was more like van camping than resort living. Below deck was a small, cute kitchen, a cozy living room with prayer flags and bohemian couch cushions, a master bedroom where the couple and the baby slept, a small bathroom, and our sleeping nooks. Above the deck was a covered area that housed the wheel and a seating area. The boat's front deck had space for paddle boards, surfboards, and a deck area to lay out in the sun.

The first night on the boat, Natasha and I were lying on the upper deck sharing a beer, and I was surprised to look up at the sky and not recognize what I was seeing. Until then, The Big Dipper had been the constellation of stars that anchored me to my place in relation to the night sky. I gazed up at the unfamiliar Southern Cross, and it hit me; we were halfway around the world.

Waking up on a sailboat floating in turquoise water in the middle of the sea should have been pleasure enough, but it was the coffee that motivated me out of bed. I thought living for coffee was a normal and obvious part of being human. I could go without cigarettes, and I could have gone temporarily without beer, but I don't know what would have happened if we didn't have coffee.

On the sailboat, I usually wake up before Conrad, the boat captain, but I wouldn't get out of bed. Conrad was in his late thirties and was the son of a California real estate developer and the descendant of Texas cotton farmers. In the short time we were there, he had already proclaimed proudly that he was "just really good at making his dreams come true." He looked like a stereotypical surfer dude with his blond hair he pulled back into a ponytail, and a couple of hemp necklaces hanging down his tan hairy muscular chest. Upon our arrival, he had been friendly, but I didn't feel comfortable being alone with him. Most people would have probably gotten up and made their coffee, but I would lie in bed nervously. I listened to the sounds he was making in the kitchen, hoping to hear the rattle of the tea kettle, which signaled the coffee was being made. When I finally heard Maryam and the baby's voices, it felt safe to get out of bed. Maryam also came from old money. She was from India and was tall and thin and had beautiful dark skin and long straight black hair that fell down the middle of her back. She had been a teacher and a yoga instructor. She had moved onto the sailboat with Conrad after they met at a resort while she was on vacation in

Tahiti with her parents. Since then, she had only left the boat to have the baby. Mia was about nine months old, and her balance and orientation to the world were being shaped in relation to the gentle sway of the ocean. She would crawl around the tiny cabin and pull herself up on the bench seats. Although the thought of coffee was secretly taking up most of my attention, another part of me loved seeing Mia in the morning. I would smile at her excitedly, and she would smile back and babble her greetings, flapping her arms and explaining proudly what she was working on, which was chewing on a toy or throwing it on the ground. In my habitual animated speech therapist voice, I would narrate,

“Mia! Good morning, good morning, well, hello!” “Oh, yes, you found a ball!” “That’s right, throw it!” and she would follow along,

“Babble-giggle”

Her Mom, Maryam, was proud of her baby girl’s communication, and she played along enthusiastically, smiling, giggling, and cheering her on. She expertly alternated her attention between her daughter and me and asked cheerfully.

“Megan, how did you sleep?” I was not thinking about how I slept but about when the coffee would be ready. I was having a conversation, but with full awareness of what was happening in the kitchen, every move. What was he doing over there? Is the water even on the stove?

“Good, good, I slept fine, and you?” “How are we doing this morning?” I replied with matching cheerfulness. We would chat, and eventually, Natasha woke up and joined us, and after what seemed like ages gone by, the coffee would be ready. The first sip and the torture of being awake were temporarily relieved. The caffeine and the conversation built into a day that could now be conquered. When the caffeine buzz peaked and started its descent, we would make our moves toward what we were going to do next. Another cup of coffee, or maybe a daytime beer today? I would consider silently. It wasn’t my boat, and I was a guest, so I left myself to hope.

It was winter in Tahiti; it would rain at night and periodically throughout the day. When it wasn’t raining, Maryam would open the hatch in the cabin, letting the sunlight and salty breeze pour in. Mia, the baby, reacted the same every time. As the hatch lifted, she would reach her chubby toddler arms up to the sky and salute the sun as the rush of fresh air hit her smiling face.

I didn’t know what an atoll was before arriving in Tahiti. It is a giant crater lake in the middle of the ocean. Sailboats anchor inside the rim of the crater, a broad enough strip of land in some places for small villages and thin enough in some areas to see to the ocean through the palm trees on the other side. An atoll is formed when an oceanic mountain has long since blown its top, and the rim is all that remains above water. The shallow coral reef surrounding the perimeter of the atoll is teeming with every type of sea life. We flew to the atoll, but if you arrive by sailboat, there is an

entrance where sailors on open ocean journeys can enter. The access to the atoll was called “The Cross.” It is an opening in the rim of the lagoon, which used to be the site of an ancient river mouth. It is where the big fish and sharks come to feed and where the incoming waves form off the reef into fast-firing barrels.

We spent the first part of our trip on the opposite side of the atoll from The Cross. The boat rested along the internal shoreline of a thin white sandy stretch of beach. The calm, mysterious, turquoise waters stretched between where the boat was anchored in deeper water to the palm tree-lined shore. Natasha and I wanted to swim to shore to explore. Conrad encouraged us, and he said it was totally safe, but in a calm voice, he shared his memory of the first time he saw a reef shark and how it can be a little unnerving. The reef sharks were everywhere, and I trusted him they weren’t a threat. I thought I trusted him, but I felt my heart rate speed up a little. Natasha and I jumped in the water and started swimming towards shore, and I tried to settle into my stroke.

Stroke, stroke, breath. Stroke, stroke, breath, I repeated silently, trying not to look below me but not being able to avoid it. Nothing there. Stroke, stroke, breath. Where is Natasha? I stopped to tread water, looked around, and located her swimming not too far away. I put my head back down and continued swimming.

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stay calm. The shore seems so far away.

Stroke, stroke breath, stroke breathe. Where is Natasha? We both stop and tread water.

“How are you doing?” “I yell over.

“Good, you?”

“Good.” We both put our heads down and continued swimming. The visibility increased as we neared the shore, and an occasional fish could be spotted below. No sharks. Finally, probably only ten minutes or less later, I could grab the sand with my feet and stand up to walk. We made it. Thank God.

“That was fun,” I lied to Natasha. Years earlier, when I was training for the triathlon, I had dreamt of open water swimming in turquoise water, but in my dream, I hadn’t been terrified.

The first few days on the sailboat were peaceful. There were no waves to surf inside the lagoon, and to pass the time, we went on long walks searching for shells, did some paddle boarding, and took afternoon naps. One early evening, the baby wasn’t feeling very well after a long day of walking and playing in the water. She had a wet cough, and when she breathed, there was a slight wheezing sound. It seemed just a little cold, but her mom was worried. She said one of the men on a neighboring boat was a healer, so she asked him to come to look at her. As a new Mom, far away from

doctors and family, Maryam never really knew what was OK and not OK, but unlike land-dwelling Mothers, she had very few sources to bounce off her concerns to. She explained that the man who was coming to take a look at Mia was a very peculiar character who had sailed the Atlantic alone 47 times. Before becoming a lone sailor, he was a deep-sea French Navy diver.

He had since fallen in love and was sailing the world with his girlfriend. Conrad was nearby overhearing our conversation and added that he made some of the best hand-carved jewelry you could get out here. It was made of all sorts of exotic fish bones and shark teeth and things like that. He asked the old sailor to bring his jewelry over to show us.

Claude and his girlfriend arrived in their dinghy,

“Bonjour, bonjour.” We heard their greeting and footsteps on the deck. They climbed down the stairs of the hatch into the cabin, and Conrad went to hug the old sailor. Instead of meeting him with an embrace, Claude seemed repulsed and backed away, extending his hand for a handshake instead. Maryam smoothed over the awkward moment by introducing everyone. We all sat down, and the girlfriend began showing us his jewelry. The baby sat on her mom’s lap so Claude could check her out, and I began examining the various pendants carved in the shape of sea-inspired

symbols. I was running my fingers over the smooth bone of a necklace as the woman described that it was cut from an Abalone shell found off the coast of South Africa.

While she was talking to me, I was also aware of what was happening across the cabin. Claude's hand was on the baby's chest, and Maryam's face looked concerned as she nodded while he spoke. I picked out another necklace and held it up to the light. "This one. Oh my gosh. This one".

"You have good taste," The woman replied, catching Claude's attention across the cabin. He turned his attention toward me and explained the pendant was made from the tooth of an endangered sperm whale, and it was one of his most prized pieces. He said it is one I wouldn't likely find anywhere else, especially for his price. I held it up again, knowing I wanted it. He would give it to me for sixty-five dollars, but I hesitated because I remembered my shoestring budget. We all chatted a bit, and Maryam handed the baby to me, who sat in my lap happily, smiling, cooing, and playing with the little toys scattered around. Claude thought she had asthma and suggested keeping her out of the water for a few days. Maryam remembered that she had asthma as a child and didn't think it was too much to be concerned about. I directed my attention to Claude,

"So, you are a healer?" I asked

He said yes and explained his grandmother had been a healer and that people came from all over France to see her, and that she had passed down her knowledge to him.

“Can you heal me?” I asked jokingly

His expression became stoic and serious.

“What do you need to heal?”

“Oh, I don’t know, just the human condition, I guess,” I laughed obnoxiously.

His milky blue eyes locked sharply into mine. I laughed again, and to my surprise, his gaze didn’t let up,

“Don’t do that; stop laughing like that; you are hiding something,” he said steadily as he held his gaze. Eventually, my darting eyes met his eyes, and I’m not sure why, but I couldn’t look away. The cabin became quiet, and the side chatter stopped. For a few moments, nothing was said. I felt the urge to look away, but something inside me wouldn’t let me. The protective wall of my laughter was not available, and, at that moment, I could not push down my discomfort. I felt exposed, and tears started pouring down my face. He didn’t look away, and Maryam drew nearer to me and put her hand on my leg. The baby looked up at me from her seat on my lap. I looked down at her and tried to reassure her with a smile as the tears dripped. Claude’s gaze

continued to penetrate the invisible layers of protection I wasn't aware I hid behind.

Claude locked his gaze and said, "You drink too much, don't you?"

"Yes," I admitted as my stomach tightened slightly in shame.

"You have to stop that."

"I know," I replied, sniffing at my tears.

"Not all at once. Little by little, OK... but you know?"

"Yes, I know," I answered truthfully and felt myself relaxing a little. I knew I needed to quit, or maybe I knew the time was approaching.

"Whoever he was, forget him, do you understand?" I nodded yes, even though I didn't know what man he was referring to. Did he mean all of them? He said again, "Forget him, leave it behind, forget him."

"OK," I answered.

"You understand what I am saying?" He picked up on my uncertainty.

"Yes, I understand," replying with more conviction this time

"Good." He got up, got a glass from the kitchen, and filled it halfway with water. He held it up and said, "Do you see this glass half full of water?"

“Yes”

“This water, this is you; this is what you need to do,” He threw it out into the sink and held the empty glass towards me. “That’s all. That’s all. You understand?”

“Yes,” I replied, and I did understand him, although it was a deep understanding I didn’t yet have words for. He asked me to stand up, and he put his hands on the crown of my head for a few moments before pulling them off quickly and sweeping them up toward the sky. I didn’t feel anything. He seemed confident a lot had shifted. The intensity of the room softened, and Maryam put her hand on my back, and with her eyes, she asked me if I was OK. I shook my head in assurance as tears continued to pour down. Claude and his girlfriend collected their jewelry, and I said I would like to think more about buying the necklace. Claude had turned back into an awkward guarded old sailor, and we followed them up to the deck to see them off. Just as he was about to climb the ladder down to his dinghy, to my surprise, he turned towards me and gave me a hug. I leaned into him and was touched by the feeling of care and tenderness.

After they left, we returned to the cabin, and the debriefing began. Conrad said, “That guy is a weirdo. I don’t like him; what is he doing coming over here and making my guests cry? That was fucked up” I defended him and said I was OK, not wanting to discuss it.

“It’s fine, I’m fine. I understood him.”

It was my experience, and I had been ready for it. I didn’t care what they thought.

Later in the day, Natasha and I took the paddle boards out, and when we returned, Maryam called me from below deck to say that she had a surprise for me. I peeked down the stairs into the cabin, and she stood there with a huge smile. She had Mia balancing on her hip and something swinging from her other hand. It took me a moment before I realized it was the necklace. She said, “Megan, it’s yours. He brought it for you”. I gasped, and my eyes welled up. I went towards it. I would treasure it. From somewhere in the back of the cabin, Conrad’s voice cut through my excitement.

“Well, I traded him some weed for it, so whatever. If you want to give me money for it or whatever,” Maryam rolled her eyes and assured me,

“Megan, it is for you. He brought it here for you” My stomach collapsed in disappointment,

“It’s OK, he can have it” I felt embarrassed for getting my hopes up

Maryam whispered, “It’s yours. Conrad is going to look like a Christmas tree if he puts on another necklace. It’s yours”.

Conrad kept the necklace. I never saw it again.

The time had come to leave the serene and protected shoreline of the inner lagoon to venture out to “The Cross.” I was anxious to surf and get to the part of the trip where I overcame my fears and finally found the pot of gold, dropping into world-class waves and maybe even a barrel. It was too far-fetched to believe it could happen, but what else could all these years of searching lead to if it wasn’t this moment?

My heart raced as my mind flip-flopped between two opposing story endings. One story was; about making a quantum leap in my surfing skills and becoming somebody; the other was about being found out as a fraud. The conflicting voices were dizzying and exhausting.

In the short time we had been in Tahiti, The Cross had already become a place full of legend and mystery. The distant river mouth was about as remote of a surf destination as possible. Conrad’s eyes would light up wildly, telling us stories of spearing giant tuna and then racing to the surface of the water where he would lift them above the water as he swam back to the dingy, knowing that tiger sharks would quickly be on his tail as they followed the scent of blood trails behind him in the water. He also told a story of getting knocked out while surfing alone, waking up in a pool of blood, swimming back to the dingy, and returning to the sailboat where his infant daughter and daughter’s mother waited. Maryam did not know how to sail. If there was an emergency, help would not be quick to arrive.

When we anchored at The Cross, I was overcome by eeriness and dread. The location felt raw, wild, and much more intense than where we had started the trip. The water was choppiier and darker, and there was a chill in the air and the water. An abandoned hut stood between our sailboat and the thin strip of land and coconut trees that separated us from the wide-open sea. I had to hide my fear and disappointment, not even admitting that this was not my dream. The entrance of The Cross was a wide channel to the ocean. Conrad explained to us that if the swell arrived, we would be able to see the waves rolling in from a distance and peeling towards us off the reef. My heart tightened, my throat dried up, and my stomach turned on itself. Natasha and I exchanged wide-eyed, teeth-clenched frightened looks and silent “oh my gods,” which we tried to disguise as excitement.

The swell was scheduled to arrive in a few days, but nothing was guaranteed. A storm was coming, so we only had a small window to surf before we had to leave to beat the storm to make it back to mainland Tahiti before we had to fly home. Maryam made it clear that we absolutely could not wait more than a few days for the surf and that we would have to leave before the storm whether we had surfed or not. In the meantime, Conrad seemed just as excited to snorkel and fish for tuna. I had been snorkeling once in Panama along a peaceful stretch of shallow waters. I thought it was a relaxing and magical pastime where I could have stayed all day floating around in the gentle calm. As we were loading up the dingy with spear guns and heading to the

outer reef where the big prey lurked, it still hadn't registered that this would be a different type of snorkeling. We arrived outside the reef and stopped the dingy, which swayed and bobbed in the stirred-up tides pushing towards the shore. I hurriedly put on my goggles, and without hesitation, I naively jumped off the dinghy and into the water. I had no idea all my synapses would be blasted by the jolt of what I was about to experience. I was expecting to be floating above a shallow reef, and what I had dropped into was an immense canyon of blue whose depths invoked my fear of heights. I became dizzy and disoriented.

This was awesome, right? I told myself as my body tried to calibrate to the extreme beauty and the terror. I tried to stave off what was undoubtedly the swell of a heart attack arriving. The visibility of the water was clear enough, and the depths profound enough that you could see fish and sharks swimming half a football field's length below. The reef walls contoured the canyon, and you could feel the swell of the tide as it pushed us toward the shallower reef walls. I was in survival mode faking a smile. Conrad was spearfishing, and Natasha and I were staying close to one another and taking underwater pictures.

"Can you believe this?"

"Oh my God, no, I can't." Words failed, and we mainly communicated by exchanging our best jaw-dropped expressions. I would have never said, "This is one of

the most uncomfortable experiences I've ever had, and I can't wait for it to be over. Please, Lord, make it be over.' We were in Tahiti, and this was supposed to be awesome. This had to be awesome. This had to be IT.

I'm not sure how long we were snorkeling, but I remember being relieved when Conrad called us above water and told us it was time to float back in. He explained we wouldn't take the dingy, but instead, we would allow the incoming tide to push us through the river mouth and back to the boat. He said we may see a hammerhead or a tiger shark below but not to worry.

"Sounds good," I said, but what I meant was, are you fucking kidding me?

"Here we go, follow me" We put our heads back down into the underwater universe as the surge of the incoming tide pushed us in undulating heaves forward. The few times I lifted my head out of the water, I wish I hadn't because the transition to the dark, choppy surface of the water was disorienting. When we returned to the boat, I was dizzy and nauseous. I couldn't wait to be back on more stable ground.

"That was awesome; thank you so much, Conrad," I lied.

Maryam and the baby would stay back on the boat while Conrad was out fishing. She would start preparing dinner and ready herself for his evening homecoming. She would shower and emerge from below the deck dressed in a bikini and slinky summer dress, lightly perfumed, skin glistening, long dark hair blowing in the breeze with some surfy music playing. Maryam looked beautiful in these moments. For a while, I believed what I saw. When Conrad returned, he would sit in the dingy at the edge of the sailboat, cleaning the fish as sharks circled, ramming the dingy, slashing and thrashing at the scraps. At the same time, we women swooned at his bravery, danced with the baby, and closed our eyes to soak in the outrageous scene. Part of me swooned, although my heart raced when a shark would strike a little too close to Conrad's blood-soaked hands. The bigger sharks stayed to circle the boat long after dinner and were still there in the morning, which made deciding to get in the water for a swim an internal war. Conrad said it was safe, and he was the captain.

Natasha was more interested in snorkeling and fishing than me. She and Conrad would head out with the spears, and I would stay with Maryam. I knew I still had to come up with the courage to surf, and my nerves were already frying. When Conrad and Natasha were out, Maryam and I would chat about life, the baby, and what we wanted to do with our lives. There were moments when I would catch her out of character - when she didn't think anyone was looking and she wasn't beautiful. The skin around her collar bones suctioned around her bones. She had no fat, but her belly

protruded as if secretly in hunger when she relaxed. Heavy dark circles drooped towards thin down-turned dry lips. When she wasn't performing, there was no life in her.

“Do you think it's OK, Megan, what we are doing here? Living on this boat with a baby? Away from other kids?” she would ask with worried eyes. I would give her an answer from the perspective of a speech therapist,

“She seems to develop typically, her pre-verbal language is ahead of schedule, and her social skills are excellent.” Maryam would perk up and reassure herself,

“What child gets this opportunity to experience the ocean, the swimming, the beaches. Even though she is so small, I think she will remember this. It will be a part of her”. I agreed,

“Yes, she will remember.”

After a few days at The Cross with no sign of a swell, the atmosphere shifted. Conrad and Maryam's act started to crack. Maryam wanted to know what the plan was. We had to leave within two days to beat the storm, make it to a distant neighboring island, and eventually to mainland Tahiti for our flight. Otherwise, we would be trapped inside the atoll for the rest of our trip and have to repurchase a commuter plane ticket to Tahiti. Conrad and Maryam's muffled bickering did not go

unnoticed. We knew something was wrong. It finally led to a sit-down conversation about our options. Maryam said,

“Look, girls

I know you came all this way to surf, but if we don't leave within the next couple of days, we won't be able to see Morea, and you will have to repurchase a flight to Tahiti. We will be stuck anchored inside the atoll in the storm with nothing to do. In Morea, there is so much to see.” I looked at Natasha, and I'm sure our stomachs dropped in unison.

“What do you think, Conrad?” Natasha deferred to the captain

“Maryam made up her mind, so we are leaving. You came all this way to surf, and Maryam wants to go shopping, so we have to leave” He sounded like a teenager

“Conrad, that is not fair. We will be stuck here on this boat for a week with nothing to do in the storm, and we don't even know if the surf is coming,” Natasha spoke up,

“Do you think the surf is coming, Conrad?”

“Yes, it's coming, it's coming in four days, and it's going to be perfect.”

“You don't know that, Conrad,” Maryam pleaded.

“Maryam, you are retarded. Who knows how to read the forecast, me or you?” he managed to call her names without instantly registering in my brain as abusive.

“OK, that is true. You are the captain, and you know what to do, so we will stay”.

“Is that what you want, girls? You want to surf?” She turned to us

“Well, yes, I’d like to surf,” Natasha said.

“I’d also like to surf, but if it’s best to leave, we will be OK; it has been an amazing trip already,” I said, trying to sympathize with Maryam.

“Yes, of course.” Natasha agreed, “We will be OK with whatever happens.”

“They want to surf, Maryam. We are staying. Can you ladies get a plane ticket back to Tahiti?”

“Yes,” we both agreed without hesitation.

“Fine, then we stay,” Conrad had the final say.

Maryam, the good wife and great actress, returned, and she managed to light up her face and soften her frustration and say,

“OK then, we stay.”

It didn't take long for her resentment at the decision to build up, and we could hear them fighting again within hours. Their fighting was ugly. Name-calling, insults, manipulation, threats, ultimatums. It was becoming clear that Maryam needed to leave this place before the storm came. She was fed up, lonely, bored, and starting to go mad. She didn't let up on her campaign to leave, and at one point, Conrad buckled and stormed into our bunk area,

“Sorry ladies, Maryam wants to go shopping and eat at her fancy fucking restaurants in Morea, so she is ruining your surf trip, and we are leaving. Sorry, I'm really sorry, she is retarded and selfish”.

“Don't say that, Conrad. It's OK. It's what is best for everyone,” I replied, getting fed up with his name-calling.

“Whatever, dude, this fucking blows. Fucking selfish bitch” He muttered as he stormed off. As soon as she left, Natasha and I broke into tears and hugged each other, not because of the abuse on the boat but because our surf dreams were ending.

“It's over then. We aren't going to surf.”

“It's over.” Natasha cried

Neither of us could believe it.

The fighting on the boat continued, and the constant onslaught of insults was getting to Natasha. It mirrored so many things about her marriage, and at one point, I called a complete stop and scolded them,

“That is it! You guys have to stop! Stop this right now! I mean it. We have had enough! Natasha is going through a divorce, and this is awful for her. You have to stop!” They froze in their tracks. Their faces looked like kids who had just gotten caught stealing candy from the candy store.

“Megan,” Maryam said. “You are right. I’m so sorry. This has to stop. Conrad, this is affecting them. We have to stop.”

“I’ve had enough of this; I can’t handle it anymore” Conrad’s eyes were wild, and he looked like he was at his breaking point. “I’m going fishing. We have to decide right now if we are staying or going. Are we staying or going, Maryam?”

She must have been spooked by his fragility, and she said, “OK, OK, we are staying. That’s it, we are staying. You will surf, and we will get flights, and that is it. It is over. It’s done. We are staying”.

“Are you sure?” Hope filled Conrad’s voice.

“Yes, I’m sure we are staying. OK? OK, we are staying” She faked a smile.

“OK, ladies, are you happy? You get to have your surf? Are you happy?” Her eyes were crazed and distant. We were happy, but the stakes had risen. We would have to surf no matter the wave size. There was no backing out. It was as if I sensed the swell arriving in the distance. An eerie dread, once again, washed up and over me.

The swell arrived, and the energy of the waves felt like a supernatural freight train arriving. I used every mental trick to stay calm enough to get on the dinghy. According to Conrad, the waves were small, and I can't tell you because I don't remember much about surfing. I remember seeing Natasha's head bob up and down from behind the one wave she caught. I remember being genuinely happy and cheering for her through my terror. I remember Conrad saying, “You didn't get that excited for me.”

The next wave was mine, and I couldn't bail because he was giving it to me, and if I didn't go, he would miss it too, and he would be very annoyed. As the wave neared, all thinking stopped. I know I paddled, and then moments later, disappointment and relief flooded my body. I didn't catch it. I hated this. I wanted it to be over. I don't know if I paddled for any more waves that day. The sets came through infrequently, and there was a long, tense wait between the handful of opportunities. I don't think Natasha caught another wave. We were both shaken up and relieved to return to the sailboat that evening.

The next day the waves were smaller, and we surfed again, but I hadn't recovered. I had no energy in my arms, and my mental tricks were failing. I could barely pretend. I wiped out one wave, and it was surprisingly gentle. Had I imagined the danger? Had I been scared for nothing? It didn't matter. I just wanted it to be over. Later that evening, the waves increased again, and I stayed on the boat. Natasha and Conrad surfed, and she did well. I stayed back and spent the evening with Maryam, who was spinning out in a different way.

“Megan, it's not that I don't like him. I hate him”. She was cracking, and the words spilled out freely now. As I listened to her go on and on about how horrible of a person Conrad was, I exhausted myself further trying to console her.

Chapter 15 - Threshold

I returned from Tahiti changed, but not how I thought I would have changed. I thought I would have a blissful breakthrough, but I was even more raw and agitated than before I left. I returned to my housemates, who wanted to see my pictures and hear about how epic my trip had been. I was anxious to explain how the enviable lifestyle the couple portrayed was actually fake, scary, and abusive. We sat on their brand-new oversized couch with views looking out over the city. I flipped through the pictures, feeling my heart race with urgency to explain everything. The pictures looked straight out of a National Geographic, but my head became hot as I struggled to explain the abusive dynamics on the boat. Their eyes were stronger than their ears, and I could feel them salivating at the images of us smiling in paradise.

“I want to see a picture of this couple” Sara’s curiosity pleased me, and I hurried to find a picture of them. For a moment, I thought she understood me.

I stopped scrolling when I landed on the image of Conrad, Maryam, and the babysitting together in the shallows of the clear gemlike water, smiling among the backdrop of white sand and palm trees.

To my shock, Sara’s reaction to the picture was,

“Wow, they are living the dream.”

My stomach sank. No! Damn it. No, that is the whole point. They aren't living the dream at all. It was a nightmare. It's all fake. It is all just an image. They are not well and do not have the support they need to take care of their child, and somebody needs to intervene. It couldn't be me. Nobody would ever believe me. Nobody ever sees what I see.

“Not really.” I sighed.

Shortly after returning from Tahiti, I started thinking about taking my old job back, working with young children. I didn't want anything to do with any more shallow fantasies and images of perfection. I wanted something real. I felt the need to humble myself and be grateful for the opportunity to have a decent income and make a morally upright contribution. I needed to devote my life to being a good person. I swung wildly back in the direction of thinking my surfing dreams were just a way to make myself look good.

I reached out to my former officemate, who had been my friend when I worked at the special education agency before moving to Nicaragua. She had been working at the agency for nearly twenty years. I wanted to run the idea of returning by her.

It was the end of summer, and we met at the beer gardens. She was already sitting in a booth when I spotted her. I caught her eye, and some part of me noticed she seemed troubled, but she smiled as she stood up to greet me.

“Heyyyyy, oh my gosh, it’s so so good to see you!” I rushed over, and we reached out to hug.

“It’s good to see you too. I can’t believe you are back.”

“I know, right? Me neither, it is surreal, but I’m glad to be here, so so glad to be here.”

“Really? That’s good” She sounded confused.

“Yess! Soooo, I have big news. I am thinking of coming back to the agency” Her face didn’t change expression, except her eyes looked worried, and she shifted in her seat.

“What do you think? I think it could be different now. I heard there will be new leadership, and I can help now. I see things more clearly. I can help them with online services, my Spanish has improved, and I can help with the equity issues. What do you think? Is it better now?” I wouldn’t accept anything other than what I wanted to hear.

“Honestly. If anything, it is worse” She shifted again in her seat, and her big doe eyes looked a little watery.

“Really? Shit. I talked to Kevin, and that is what he said too. Damn. OK, I hear you. It must be bad. I don’t know. I just feel this really strong pull to come back. I know it doesn’t make sense, but it is just so strong”.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. I want you to come back. I mean, I would LOVE it if you came back. Selfishly, I would LOVE it. I just don’t know that you would love it.”

“Mmm yeah. Well, I think I’ve made up my mind. I hear you it’s bad, but I think I’ll reach out to leadership”. I steamrolled forward.

“Yay, well, it would be awesome to see you every day. Let me know”.

I reached out to my former supervisors, and they were interested in having me back, but they said I needed to interview again to be fair to other applicants. I was nervous because I was already attached to this new vision of how my new life would go and how everything would be better. My thoughts ping-ponged back and forth between the fear of rejection if they didn’t hire me to the excitement of imagining it all working out.

The morning of the interview, I couldn’t eat, and I drank a giant mug of strong black coffee instead. My hands shook as I zipped up my pencil skirt and slipped on a pair of dressy flats. I had spent the last four years in Nicaragua wearing flip-flops.

When I arrived in the parking lot of the office building, I felt like a wild and swirling tornado of nerves and inspiration. As I swung open the doors, I was taken aback by the dull and stagnant feeling in the air. I ignored it and took a deep breath, and put a smile on my face. I found the room where the interview panel was seated and waiting. The same people interviewed me four years earlier, and all the questions were the same. Things had to have changed a little bit. About halfway through the interview, what was left of my forward momentum fizzled out. The plain office walls and the dull mood became stuffier by the minute. Flashes of the Nicaraguan coastline flashed through my mind, and I could almost smell the saltwater. Suddenly my skirt felt too tight, and I wriggled my feet out of the stiff shoes. I had many questions for the interview panel, and my eyes widened at how outdated their answers were. I was speechless, but I never once considered changing course. I had entered a time warp and was now going backward in slow motion. I shifted in my seat and took a sip of water to wake me up. I pushed my doubts down, slipped my shoes back on, and sat straight in my chair. It was OK, I told myself. I was there to help them snap out of it.

About a week later, I hadn't heard back from the agency, and my patience was thin. I couldn't concentrate, and the ping-pong match between doom and excitement intensified. I finally decided to just call them to see if they had decided. The woman I talked to was surprised I hadn't heard yet and forwarded my message to the director. Later that afternoon, the director called me and offered me the job. It seems they had

forgotten to ring me. A small voice tugged at me, annoyed that they found me so unremarkable that they didn't even remember to call me. I quickly suffocated that voice. I was so relieved I could have fainted. I let all my former colleagues know I was returning, and Tif undertook a fierce campaign to get me into her office. I didn't have a strong feeling or preference about my office space. Even though part of me was craving to be acknowledged, another part felt a sort of self-punishing guilt for being a white American, and I would have taken a desk in the closet.

The office manager told her I couldn't be assigned to her office, but Tif didn't take no for an answer. She pressed them to assign me to her office as if life depended on it. I didn't see why it was that big of a deal, but looking back, my life depended on it. They finally agreed.

Now that I had the job lined up, I could relax, except that I couldn't relax. My roommate Sara had been planning her wedding for over a year, and the big day had almost arrived. She asked me to officiate the ceremony, and I also offered to get flowers for her bouquet. Still, I was otherwise trying to steer clear of the wedding blitz. Stress levels were high in our household, and despite my efforts to minimize my involvement, I struggled to keep up with the pace. Since Tahiti, I had started flinching at everything, and my racing heart was relentless. Drinking wasn't providing me much relief, and it often made me feel more agitated. The pain in my side had disappeared from the birth control, but everyone was suddenly bothering me. It seemed like

everyone else was killing themselves with stress and needed to calm down. If they would just calm down, I could calm down. If the world would just calm down, then I could calm down. I had also gotten a couple of bad colds, and I still wasn't sleeping. I couldn't wait for the wedding to be over. Once the wedding was over and my new job started, I could relax, and everything would be better.

The weekend of the wedding arrived. It was a multi-day extravaganza. I hadn't really considered how much pressure it would be to officiate the ceremony. I was flattered and didn't think through it when I agreed to it. I had pictured a relaxed, laid-back wedding, but this was turning into a camping-themed Oscar ceremony.

Sara made it very clear that her wedding would be perfect and that it was the most important day of her life. I told her that every day was the most important day of my life, but my words did not penetrate her wedding-crazed eyes.

The big weekend finally arrived, and I set up my tent and cracked a beer as the other guests arrived. I did not have the energy to meet everyone, and I hid my camping chair under a tree in the shade, sipping drinks with a couple of mutual friends. The itinerary was packed with activities leading to the ceremony on the last day.

The afternoon of the wedding, my nerves were reaching a breaking point. Everyone was on edge, my head felt cloudy, and I was disoriented. I drank a big glass

of white wine and went over and over the speech I had prepared. I would periodically notice my teeth were in a death clamp, and I would try to loosen my jaw. My chest tightened as I imagined messing the whole thing up. Deep breathes. Just take deep breaths. It will be fine, I told myself. I set the wine down and walked to the bathroom to put on some makeup and finish getting ready. I tried to put my hair in an up-do, but my hands were shaking, and I ended up throwing my brush down. Jesus. I just wanted it all to be over.

The ceremony was a blur, but it went well enough. My voice shook, but I didn't screw the whole wedding up. I was so relieved it was finally over, and as the guests walked over to the reception area, all I could think about was having a drink. The reception got underway, and as the speeches were being made, I drank wine like water. The dancing started, and I was slipping. I remember twirling around, laughing, and falling. The night quickly faded to black.

The next morning, I opened my eyes, and it took me a few moments to figure out where I was. As the fabric of my tent came into focus, I felt a massive wave of relief to be somewhere familiar. I looked around me to make sure I was alone. Thank you, God, I muttered to myself. Thank the heavens above there isn't some strange man in here with me, I thought. I had ended up in my tent alone. I didn't seem to have any injuries, and water and food were next to me. I sat up slowly, and the world spun around like a heavy slow-motion merry-go-round.

My mouth was dry, and my heart was racing, but at least I was alone. It is all I could think about. At least I was alone. At least I was alone. Thank God I was alone. I rolled over, grabbed a couple of crackers, and then chugged almost the entire bottle of water until I needed to gasp for air, wiping the drips off my chin. A wave of nausea forced me to lie back down. I had a very distant feeling that I was the one who tried to take care of myself the night before. I sensed I had found the water and a snack and put myself to bed. Later, I asked one of my friends how I got to bed. She told me I just walked away from the reception area without saying anything to anyone and never came back.

I lay in the tent for a couple of more hours until I started to hear distant voices and nearby footsteps. The sun was becoming bright and hot, and I began to sweat inside the sleeping bag. I did not want to face the day, but the most important thing was that I had ended up alone and in one piece.

I knew with every cell in my body, I was done drinking. This wasn't like other times. I knew the time had been coming, and there was no mistaking it had arrived.

On the drive home, my head pounded, and all I could focus on was getting home and curling up safe and sound in my bed. I heard my phone buzz and rolled my eyes, wishing the world would just stop.

It was a text from Sara letting me know that her mom had decided to stay two more nights and would be staying in my bed, and could I stay somewhere else? As I read the words, my whole body flooded with anger. I threw the phone down, and my heart pounded like a jackhammer. I had to pull over. For the first time in my life, I was absolutely and completely, with every cell in my body, fed up. I wrote back and told her that I was not OK and that I was going to the beach and out of service, and I would talk to her after she returned from her honeymoon. I powered down my phone, returned to the house, and rage-packed my camping and surfing gear.

I needed a break. I needed to be left alone. I couldn't do any of this anymore. I was done.

I drove down the coast to the furthest and most remote campground I knew of that had surfable waves. I found a forested campsite atop a jagged ocean cliff, nestled back among shrubs full of ripe huckleberries. When I got out of the car and took a deep breath, I felt, for a moment, that I would survive. The air was fresh and cool, and the only sounds were from the ocean and an occasional bird singing. I knew Sara would be upset at me for leaving without telling them what was wrong, but I didn't have any energy left to care. I didn't feel they understood me, and I made things worse whenever I tried to explain. I just knew everyone else needed to calm down. It wasn't me; it was everyone else. It wasn't inside me. It was out there.

I spent the week in the woods and in the water. I would have moments of discomfort and waves of restlessness, but I had zero temptation to drink. It was out of the question and didn't appeal to me. If I was away from everyone, I would be OK. Avoiding everyone forever wasn't a very reasonable long-term plan, but I had taken a rare break from thinking about the future. I took long walks along the cliff-side trail, which weaved in and out of forests and prairies speckled with wildflowers. I found a surf spot with decent mellow waves and stayed in the water until my arms were too tired to paddle. When there were no waves, I found a river, sat in my camping chair in the crystal clear current, and read a book. On one of my walks, I spotted a whale so close it made me gasp. I was starting to feel better.

One evening I drove to the nearby town to look around, and I pulled into a parking lot overlooking a beach and the harbor.

Some reader boards piqued my interest, so I walked over to look. They told how the beach was the site of a major battle between Native Americans and settlers. It described how most of the Native American population had been killed, and the ones who were left put up a big fight before finally being defeated. Once captured, they were chained together and marched up the beach to a reservation near the small town where I grew up. I had heard stories of Native Americans as a little girl, but not that one. I had always fantasized about being Native American. I never once imagined that I may not have been welcomed into their world. As I read the story and looked out at

the beach, I suddenly felt the nearness of my history. In my child's mind, the Native Americans were from ancient times, but at that moment, it registered how recent it had been, and my spine shuttered. An eeriness filled the air, and I felt sick and had the urge to go back to my tent and curl up in my sleeping bag. As I drove back to the campsite, I told myself I would no longer pretend everything was OK. It wasn't OK. Things needed to change. Damage needed to be addressed and repaired. I didn't want to participate in any more lies. I vowed that I wouldn't go along with any more lies.

After nearly seven days at the beach, I was ready to drive home. My heart was beating normally, my stomach was at ease, and my mind was clear. On the drive home, I was singing to the radio, thinking about starting my new life. However, when I arrived home, Sara was not at ease. They said they were extremely upset and worried about me and made it very clear I had ruined their honeymoon. My heart started to race again, and I instantly blamed them, making things worse. It was two against one, and I started to panic. I tried to defend myself but eventually ran down the stairs and into my room, slamming the door behind me. It was not me! It was them! Nobody fucking got it. An inner flash fire engulfed me, filling my head and overtaking my thoughts.

I lay in my bed in a puddle of helpless sobs and vowed I would show them the errors of their thinking. I would prove I was right and that they were the ones who needed help. Not me. I was helpless. I was a victim.

“And every once in a while, I will come out and tell you what time of night it is,”

Sojourner Truth

Chapter 16 - The Eruption

Over the coming weeks, my heartbeat didn't slow down; it sped up. Work continued to worsen. Everything was sending me into crying fits. I was desperately screaming for people to listen to me, but it was as if they were walking around in soundproof bubbles. The world was falling apart, but everyone acted like things were normal and fine. Not everyone looked the other way; a few people even supported my deranged campaign against the world's ills. One day, my co-worker Sam came into my office to show me a sticker on her water bottle.

“A synchronicity is a wink from the Universe.” She read to soothe me. I looked at her straight on,

“Is it? Is it really? Or is it just a sign that you are about to slip again on another cosmic banana peel?” My cynicism sucked all life out of the room.

Her head hung momentarily, but she perked back up, managed a laugh, and rubbed my back. I believed and promoted that kind of shit, but I was turning bitter. It was happening.

“Megan!” While working at her desk and listening to our conversation, Tif spun around in her chair. My back and neck stiffened, and I wanted to shout “NO” before hearing what she said, but I kept my mouth shut.

“You have to meet Teresa! Leadership hired her to provide mental health support to staff, and she is... she is magical; you will love her. You have to meet her”.

Sam chimed back in, “Megan, you will love her. You have to meet her. She is like...” Her words trailed off, and she wiggled her fingers like sparkles would come out of them at any second. Tif nodded her head in agreement. They were both wide-eyed and leaning in.

“Jesus, you guys, she is just a human,” I scoffed. The ladies were silent and exchanged glances and, in unison, said something to the effect of, “Mmmm, I’m not so sure about that.”

“Half human? Fine, fine, what is her number?” supernatural reviews were enough to convince me. I didn’t need any help, but I wanted to see what this lady was about, and maybe I could ask her how to help my housemates. Perhaps she could help me

convince everyone else that they were the ones who needed help. Tif had already written Teresa's email on a sticky note, and I stuck it to my computer. That evening after everyone had gone home and the office building was quiet, I emailed Teresa and set up our first session.

Two weeks later, the time came for me to meet Teresa. I could barely concentrate on work, my whole body was aflame, and my legs bounced up and down as I stared aimlessly out my office window. I wandered down the stairs, and my legs felt like they would buckle underneath me. "Knock, knock," I said quietly as I cracked open the door. We introduced ourselves, and I settled into a chair across from her. I told her I had nothing particular to share about the job in case she didn't want to see me. She assured me it was good to get to know each other so if a crisis happened at work, she would have some background, and that would be helpful to her. I told her how I had been living in Nicaragua and how I had to flee the country due to a political crisis. Tears started to roll down my cheek after only a few minutes of sitting with her. She passed me the tissue,

"I guess I'm not really over it," I sniffed.

"No, no, you are not over it. You are a peaceful person, and that must have felt like a physical blow," she said, clutching her hands to her stomach as if to have been

punched. Something inside me softened. I felt understood for the first time in what felt like so long.

“Yes, it did feel like that.” I sighed.

We talked about my housemates, with whom I had continuing conflicts. I felt they needed help, and they thought I needed help. Teresa pointed out that I could only be responsible for myself, and I agreed that I did need help. I needed help being understood. I needed a translator. Maybe she could give me some magic Q-tips to give away so people could clean out their ears. She had no magic Q-tips, but she seemed to listen and understand. She explained that the two-against-one dynamic can turn into something called triangulation, which wasn't very fun to navigate. After just one session, without any suggestion on her part, I knew I needed to find somewhere else to live. I realized I didn't have the energy to keep up with Sara, and I felt our lifestyles were diverging. I had to let them get on with their new marriage and lives.

I found an ad on Craigslist for a yurt. I had always wanted to live in a yurt. I had been dreaming of one for many years. I went to see it, and it was beautiful and near work. It was meant to be; I just knew it. The gentle older couple who owned it worked as an artist and a librarian. The man seemed to like me, but looking back, the woman saw something concerning looming in my shadow. I saw it in her penetrating

deep brown eyes and in the way her eyebrows furrowed as she looked over my shoulder.

The next day I received a voicemail that they rented the yurt to someone else. I collapsed from the rejection. The humiliation rose like hot lava and then took me down. Nobody wanted to rent to poor white trash like me. The impulse to get a drink came and went. I thought of sending the sweet couple an angry email to explain to them all the reasons they were messed up, but that idea also came and went quite quickly, thank God. Without the possibility of having a drink, what I was left feeling was a huge burning trash pile inside me. I endured the pain of the unfamiliar ego bruise and moved on by telling myself it wasn't a good fit after all. The yurt was a little out of my price range, and looking back, the woman had read my shadow right. Ghosts were lurking.

I continued looking for a new place to live. At the same time, everyone around me seemed to be becoming increasingly unreasonable and troubled. Why was everyone getting more annoying all at once? I asked myself, not realizing I was the common denominator in my problems. My most intimate relationships were coming apart at the seams. They say alcohol tears people apart, but apparently, for me, it was keeping my relationships together. It numbed my body's gut reactions, disappointments, and discomfort. Numbing out allowed me to go along with a pace, situations, treatment, and conversations that didn't feel right. Without the numbing,

everything hurt; everything started to rise to the surface, explosive and agitated. I couldn't cope with it any longer and finally started to admit I wasn't OK. I was very worried about my racing heart, but I didn't want to go to a regular doctor because I didn't want to take any pills without getting to the root of what was wrong with me. I returned to the acupuncturist who helped me during the triathlon years earlier. I made an appointment with her and had another meeting with Teresa, the half-human.

I went to my acupuncture appointment, and to my surprise, the practitioner, Tami, remembered me. I told her that I had quit drinking and smoking, but I couldn't get my heart rate to slow down, and I wasn't sleeping. I told her I was on birth control, and it had helped the pain in my right ovary, which had become increasingly worse since I'd seen her a few years back. As I spoke, she was taking notes, and when I mentioned birth control, she paused, pushed up her glasses, and took an audible breath as if she was about to break some news, but then she just paused. I knew at that moment, as if I could see her thoughts, that I needed to get off birth control. She asked me my age, and I said 39. She mentioned perimenopause, and even though I didn't know what that was, my insides recoiled at the audacity of this lady to suggest I was aging. However, I had nobody else to turn to, and I was desperate for relief, so I pretended I wasn't gut-punched by the experience of someone telling me the truth. First, it was Claude pointing out my avoidant laugh, and now this woman was telling

me I was subject to the same laws of nature as every other woman alive. The nerve of them.

Tami took my pulse and finished her exam. Upon the conclusion of her check-in, she sat up and steadied herself. In a serious tone, she asked me if I had a primary care physician. My stomach constricted, and even though my heart felt like an alarm clock that wouldn't shut off, I protested having to go back to a regular doctor.

“I thought you could be my primary care physician?”

“Mmm. Do you have a gynecologist?”

“No”

“I am going to give you the name of a primary care physician and the name of a woman who I highly recommend for women's care. I recommend you see both.” No. No. No. I couldn't accept this recommendation. I can fix this. I would get off birth control, and I would fix myself.

“OK, thank you, I will call them.” I lied.

“Meanwhile, today we can treat you where you are at” She went ahead with placing needles in various places around my body. I tried to relax and ignore the disappointment that I still wasn't getting any answers. She suggested multiple tinctures

and a natural sleeping aid. I left with a renewed determination that I would fix this on my own. I would handle this.

I continued searching for a new place to live and found an ad for a semi-cooperative living situation. I immediately switched gears and remembered how good I felt living in the cooperative-style house in Nicaragua. I responded to the ad and made an appointment to visit the vintage cottage, which shared a yard with a few other dwellings.

The property owner was a small elderly man with long gray hair matted under his black beanie. He spoke softly and shared that he was a painter and a self-described old hippie. He walked me around the property and explained there was a young teacher living in the studio apartment who was also an artist and a lovely young couple who lived in the big house.

He showed me inside the cottage, which was up for rent. It was painted bright yellow with arched walkways and a sunny kitchen. It had two bedrooms and an artist's studio, which was too much space for me, but I thought I could use the extra room as a yoga studio. I was shocked at how cheap it was. The old man said he believed in affordable housing and believed everyone deserved a place to live, especially the misfits. My gut tightened a little at the suggestion I was a misfit, but I ignored it. He showed me into the artist's studio, which looked out into the yard. There was a

homemade fire-pit area and apple trees with leaves starting to turn yellow and brown for the Fall. We gazed out the window.

“I really like the feel of this room; what has this space here been used for?” His eyes got watery, and he hung his head momentarily.

“My partner of 35 years and I used this space to paint here. She passed away last year”. I paused, searching for what to say.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. I think I can feel her presence.”

“Yes. Barbra is her name. Her ashes are buried right here outside this window under the Buddha statue”.

“I’m honored to be here.”

“We are glad you are here too.”

It felt too good to be true, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up like I had for the yurt. When I got the call that they wanted me to move in, my jaw relaxed momentarily before I started worrying about how to break the news to my housemates.

Sara accepted the news that I had found a new place to live. She said they just wanted me to be OK. I packed my few possessions, and my parents came to help me move.

My new living situation started out sweet and hopeful, but work was becoming the latest perceived source of tension and turmoil. When it came time for my second meeting with the therapist, Teresa, I was anxious to tell her how terribly my supervisors had been behaving.

“How are things going?” She asked as I settled into the chair across from her.

“Ummm, well, some things are going really good, but other things are not going so well.”

“Well, that sounds normal. That sounds like life. What would you like to tell me about?” Her words were relaxed but not overly sweet or careful, which would have bothered me. I rattled on for a while about how work wasn’t going like I had expected it to go,

“Yeah, it’s just, it’s just... like the supervisors are not listening to me. I’m working in this preschool, and it is... it is like seriously not safe. The kids are beating each other up, and they are hitting the teachers, and it is totally out of control. I mean, seriously crazy. I couldn’t even stay the other day. I had to leave. It was so bad. It was like...it was like,” My heart had started to race, and I was wondering if she was getting it, and I lost track of my words. I waited for her to say something, but she just sat there calmly, so I tried again to explain myself.

“I think I need to call DHS because none of my supervisors are doing anything about it. Nobody is listening to me. The kids are in harm’s way, you know? Nobody is doing anything” My head started to feel hot with frustration, and I stopped there.

I don’t remember what she said; I just remember feeling relieved she understood me. I was bracing for her to tell me I was overreacting, but that wasn’t the case. We talked for a while, and I calmed down even more. After some guidance from her, I realized I was the one who wasn’t feeling safe, and I thought my supervisors needed to fix it.

“Well, it isn’t your employer’s job to keep you safe.”

They weren’t the words I wanted to hear, but I took them under consideration because she was clearly on my side.

“Huh. Oh. Yeah, I guess you are right” I let this revelation roll around in my brain. If it wasn’t their job to keep me safe, then whose job was it? I wasn’t ready for the ball to drop in my court and to hear that it was my job to take care of me, so I kept talking.

“It’s just hard because I feel like it is...it is... like an all-hands-on-deck situation. You know? Like stop everything, call in the troops! These kids aren’t safe. Like fucking do something about it. You know...?” I felt myself getting worked up again,

but I caught it this time and inhaled deeply. A long sigh escaped through my lips that sounded like air being let out of a balloon. I rolled my shoulders back and made a fake smile to release the tension in my jaw. She was silent as I settled down. She then explained how sometimes our work environment can mirror our family environment. Her words gave me pause as I remembered my recent meeting with my supervisors.

“Huh, it’s funny... I’m just remembering now that I was so mad, and the last thing I did was yell at Connie that she wasn’t protecting me”. Connie was my boss. As I was speaking, I realized how illogical and crazy it sounded to be yelling at my boss to protect me from a preschool. The thought of my mother flashed into my mind. “Huh, funny,” puzzle pieces were starting to fit together.

Teresa watched as I wrestled silently with these emerging revelations until I settled down again and looked at her.

“Tell me about your family” She weighed it time to ask.

“Oh, my parents are great. I came from a “perfect family,” I said with air quotes even though, at the time, I thought I meant what I was saying. “They are the best. Very generous. I got lucky to grow up in a pretty ideal family” She didn’t respond but shifted in her chair and let it be silent.

“Well, my parents didn’t talk about anything” I cleared my throat. “I mean ANY-thing, like nothing. You know? We did not talk about anything. You know what I mean? We never talked about anything that mattered, like anything important.” Teresa allowed for another long silence,

“They don’t sound like very good parents,” She stated matter of factly.

I didn’t move or react, but inside me, it felt like a cage had been unlatched, and the starving and feral truth had finally been let loose. Her words cut me wide open. I sat quietly, but I bet she could see the screaming ghosts flying from me in all directions.

Words started pouring out, “Well, I know I was sexually abused.” Saying this out loud surprised me, as this was the first time I heard it too. What had come over me? It didn’t feel like I was revealing a deep dark secret but just stating a fact. Looking back, I don’t think she was surprised at this news, but she may have been caught off guard at how quickly and casually it was revealed.

“I don’t remember anything, and I don’t know who it was, but I just know,” I explained. “I have all the symptoms. I drink too much. I smoke. I pick at my skin; I have pains doctors can never find,” I rattled on. “One time, I quit drinking, and I started getting the feeling and just knew I had been abused, but I didn’t overthink it. I was just curious, and I called one of my sisters and asked her if she knew of any sexual abuse or anything. She remembered all sorts of stuff with our cousins and told me

about her friend she knew was sexually abused by her dad.” One of my legs was bouncing up and down, and I noticed it and stopped it, and I also stopped talking. I looked up at Teresa, waiting to hear what she thought. I scratched at one of my cuticles and then put my finger to my mouth to bite at my nails, but I felt myself doing it and then pulled my hand away and shifted in my seat, hoping she didn’t notice.

She sat up a little straighter in her chair and calmly, but in a serious tone, said,

“Well, you will want to get more information about this. You will want to call your sister again and discuss this with your family”.

“Yes, I want to get to the bottom of this; I am ready. I am so ready” It felt like part of me was nearly salivating with excitement to finally figure this out, and another part of me was dumbfounded by all that was happening.

Teresa sat up in her chair; her face had turned even more serious.

“Megan. You are going to get through this, but you are not going to get through this alone”. Her words sent a chill up my spine. This was the end, didn’t she see? Not the beginning. I was about to fix this once and for all. This was almost over. I was nearly fixed. She will see.

“OK, I’ll check in with my family and see you in a couple of weeks.”

I emailed my oldest sister and told her I had met with a therapist at work. She encouraged me to get answers to my knowledge of being sexually abused. I asked her if she knew anything or remembered anything. I was confident she would have the answers because she was the oldest and the mother hen. She must have known. I waited eagerly for her response, eager to get my sought answers. When I read her email, I felt momentarily stunned. She didn't know anything and didn't remember anything like that happening. I didn't sense she was trying to hide anything, and it felt like she genuinely believed nothing had happened. My hope for answers felt dashed, and the plainness of her email shook me. Where did this haunting inside me come from?

After reading her email, I tried to put the idea that I had been sexually abused behind me, but I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned as my mind insisted on digging through the darkness of my memories which seemed to be reaching up at me stronger than ever. The more I tried to tell myself to drop it, the more my stomach tightened, and my head pounded. It was as if every pull of the tide of denial outward brought an even bigger wave of anguish inward, begging me deeper into my memories. Several sleepless nights followed in the same manner. Memories of my childhood were flashing up seemingly randomly. They were too distant to understand and seemed unrelated to what I was searching for.

One memory kept coming back to me again and again. I was in the bath. It felt like my little sister was there, but I couldn't see her. I could only see my dad. My rational mind didn't pick up on anything alarming about this memory. I thought it was customary to take baths every night with my dad. It was his role and his only "housework." My insides heaved with discomfort, and I thrashed back and forth on my pillow. The pain seemed to be coming and going from everywhere. My mind was foggy, and my heart was pounding out of my chest.

I tossed and turned in the dark. Another memory started repeating. In this memory, I was looking down at the scene from above as if I was floating above the bathroom ceiling. I don't know how old I was, but I must have been about half a head taller than the doorknob to the bathroom door. I had undressed to get ready for my bath, and I had just finished using the toilet, and as I stood up, I sensed him walking toward me. He was naked and had a beard and was coming towards me with a relaxed grin on his face. I could feel what the little girl felt. She felt embarrassed, and dread washed over her. Her little shoulders and head curled towards the doorknob, and then the memory went black.

And then it hit me.

It hit me all at once.

When it hit me, it was as if an atomic bomb had detonated at the core of my being and was radiating beyond time and space. No. No. No. No. No.

I finally made contact with the little hands reaching up at me from within for so long. The truth of what was at the root of my anguish shook me like a violent earthquake. It was my father. My dad, whom we were made to believe was a saintly hero, had sexually abused me.

I made it into the bathroom and threw up. I lay on the cold tile floor shaking, but no tears came. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sounds would come out. All I could do was rock back and forth, muttering no, no, no, no, no, no. All night pain and fragments of memories surged in equal and opposite force at my attempts to deny it. Every time my mind would come up with reasons why this couldn't be true, another memory would flood in, drowning out the doubt that would ultimately prove futile against the power of the truth. Tears and anguished groans would periodically break through, but I mostly thrashed in bed. I couldn't drink. I knew it. It wouldn't stop this. I couldn't do anything. I was trapped for hours, thrashing in tidal waves of anguish, thrashing in the truth as my whole life and everything I knew started to unravel faster than I could handle. Like a deer trapped in a fence, I was surging in fits to try to escape myself, followed by exhausted catatonic wide-eyed stillness. This was not survivable.

When Monday came around, and it was time to go to work, I managed to open the computer to write in sick and write to Teresa to tell her what was happening. I lay curled up in bed in the dark, unable to think or move except to check my email on my phone every few minutes to see what Teresa would have to say. I'm not sure if it was minutes or days later, and I'm not sure what she said, but some part of me noticed that she was not panicking and knew how to proceed. I doubted she knew how messed up I really was. If she did know, she likely wouldn't be so steadfast, but I had nothing else to hold onto, so I thought of nothing else but seeing her again. She would tell me how to make this go away. She would tell me how to fix this.

A few days later, I arrived at my office building dressed in my work clothes: black boots, black stretch pants, and a black tunic dress. I had several versions of the same outfit I had been wearing every day since I started. I wonder if Teresa noticed I had been dressed like I was going to a funeral since the day she met me. Even though I had no intention of working that day, I dressed up and entered the office to see her. I hadn't slept or eaten, and my skin felt raw and radioactive. My eyes were vibrating and bloodshot. The only thing in my stomach was coffee, which had left my mouth dry and my heart racing even more than usual. I spoke loudly through thin walls. She calmly reminded me that it wasn't the most private location. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. I told her about the memories that were coming up, how it was my

father, and how he would give us a bath every night. She was calm and steadfast, but she also seemed quite disturbed and concerned about everything I remembered.

“Every night?” Her jaw retracted in an ever so slight slip of visible disgust. I knew it. My situation was worse than the rest. She wouldn’t be able to help me.

I’m not sure what we talked about. She told a story that brought fierce fighting warrior energy into the room. It didn’t land in my mind, although I would later realize it wasn’t lost on me altogether. I slumped into my chair - as tears from my stomach lining stung the rims of my eyes, not substantial enough to fall. Our time ended, and as I was leaving, she sighed and briefly put her hand on my shoulder, which felt like a powerful gesture of genuine care from someone I respected. I felt like a wretch, and she put her hand on me.

The weeks to follow were a blur. I did not hold back from telling everyone exactly what was happening. I never even thought twice about it. Keeping it a secret never occurred to me. It was the truth, and it was a devastating tragedy. I didn’t feel ashamed. What did I have to do with it? I was just a little girl? I had no idea, at the time, why others would react so oddly. I told my supervisors at work and asked for time off, which they granted even though their response was strangely curt and cold. I emailed my sisters. I didn’t have the courage to tell them that our dad was responsible for the abuse, and I just told them I remembered who abused me. They mostly

responded with support, except I never heard anything from my little sister. One of my older sisters expressed concern about what this news would do to our parents, never mind what the news was doing to me.

I didn't respond. A few days later, she retracted her concerns and showed her support. Everyone, but my little sister, whom I never heard back from, said they believed me, and they were so sorry and heartbroken and were here for me. Weeks later, when I got the courage to tell my sisters and my mother the truth that the abuse happened in our home and at the hands of our father, they changed their tune. One sister reminded me I was a drunk. Another sister suddenly had a problem with me. They didn't believe me anymore. "I received nothing but love," another sister testified. I know she believed in herself. We were a "perfect" family, and our father was a saint. Any evidence to the contrary was just normal female dysfunction, which wasn't appropriate to speak about. If you thought something was wrong, you were the crazy one.

I shared what was happening with my neighbors. My new landlord, the little old man, had a strong reaction – which I now understand is what we call - triggered. His late wife had dealt with similar trauma and had died of ovarian cancer. I couldn't engage with him, and I politely thanked him for sharing his story and I kept my distance. My other neighbors were kind and supportive. The young artist told me she

wanted to be like me because I was healing, and she wanted to heal. The other couple sent compassion and gratitude for knowing what was happening.

I worked up the courage to address my brother and father in a separate email. Pushing the send button felt like it would kill me. I don't know how I did it. I never heard anything back from either of them. My initial plan was to hold my father accountable in the court of law, and I planned to get a lawyer. The thoughts streamed through my head in my bleary-eyed rage and shock.

In the following weeks, I expected everyone's world to stop spinning, especially my closest friends, because my world had stopped spinning. This wasn't the case. Instead of feeling comforted and supported, I felt as if those closest to me had caught a glimpse of something ugly. No way in hell would they be taking another look. They were trying to be supportive, but the message I got was to keep it on the down low and move on. Get back to normal.

I had expected my family to be devastated. Still, I didn't expect them not to believe me, and I really didn't expect the amount of negativity I would feel directed at me. At the same time, I felt them pulling at me strongly to stay close, especially my mother. She never said she didn't believe me but never said she was leaving him either. I thought that would have been the obvious and immediate next step. Trying to communicate with her was excruciating. I became overwhelmed by everyone's

reactions, and I finally snapped and asked to be left alone. One sister became aggressive and threatened to come to my town and find me if I didn't provide regular updates. I had to block her.

My friends didn't understand why I didn't want to be in contact with my family, and they didn't know what to do with me. I didn't fully understand why my entire being was screaming at me to get away from everyone close to me until later. This kind of childhood abuse is not limited to the events themselves. Everyone and every relationship are implicated in some way because of the patterns that stem from it and the dysfunctional way I participated in all my relationships. It creates an expansive interconnected web of dysfunction but is hard to see and understand at first. At the time, it felt like nobody was treating me with respect. Every day felt like a living hell. I resigned from my job. I couldn't deal with it. All I saw was unbearable suffering and crisis everywhere. I put in my notice and packed up my office before I had even finished unpacking it. I figured I would return to school and take online classes to get my administrator's license and buy me some time to get my bearings.

A couple of months went by, and the plan to return to school fell through, and I was running out of money again. I was starting my life over from scratch, and now the scratch wasn't enough. I was in no shape to start a new job. My days were a mix of hyperactivity, terror, desperation, knee-buckling grief, excruciating pain, and long stretches of being unable to move or do anything. At one point, I turned my rage on

Teresa. What a bitch, I thought, although a distant part of me cringed at the tirade. I started blaming Teresa for ripping people open and leaving them to rot. The thought of getting a plane ticket and returning to Nicaragua crossed my mind.

As soon as I get enough money, I'm out of here and never looking back. As I formulated another escape plan, I suddenly remembered the owner of the hostel, who drank herself to death and was found alone in the hotel room covered in maggots in Nicaragua. Her ghost was with me. Shit. Going back to Nicaragua and disappearing wouldn't fix this. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

The only thing I could get myself to do was attend my acupuncture appointments. Tami was the one healthcare practitioner who seemed to understand more than most of what I was going through. When I told her what was happening to me, she calmly said, "So you are waking up?" Fucking hell, I thought. This is the waking up? It makes sense that when your subconscious erupts, you could call it an awakening, but God damn. No wonder so many people run the other way from their childhood trauma. Following the treatment, she asked in an upbeat tone, "How'd it go? Did you settle in?"

"No," I snapped. "I couldn't stop thinking about my mother," I whimpered frantically. "I feel so sorry for her." Tami cleared her throat and steered me to more solid ground.

“OK, well, that doesn’t mean the treatment didn’t work. Do you want to schedule again for next week?” I stared at her desperately.

“What are we going to do?” She removed her glasses and looked up from the bill she was preparing for me.

“Excuse me?” She responded calmly but firmly

“How are you going to fix this?” I pressured - nearly accusing her of something. She sat back in her chair and let out a deep breath and a sigh.

“OK, Megan. This isn’t like a muscle issue. This isn’t something acute I can go in there and fix”. She paused and motioned with her arms as if to sweep a circle around my entire body, “This is an everything issue.”

“Sign me up for next week,” I said, exasperated.

I stormed out of her office, consumed with rage. The tears exploded when I got in the car, and I slammed my hands against the steering wheel. When I got home, I fell to the ground in silent sobs, which morphed again into a rage. These fucking bitches making me feel stupid and not telling me what the fuck to do.... Enjoy watching me get what is coming to me...these fucking bitches don’t know me. I thrashed around the house, trying to escape myself until I arrived again in my bed in a state of what was becoming a familiar catatonic state, but this time something was

different. There was a softness. I sat up in my bed, and my mind searched for evidence of why Teresa and Tami were to blame for what I was going through, but I couldn't find any. They had never directed negativity toward me, so where was this coming from?

I realized my anger was misdirected. My anger was hot lava inside me, and it wasn't about them.

In a moment of tremendous grace, I recognized what I felt was mine to work through, even if it wasn't fair. I sat up and started Googling articles about how to heal. I scrolled through page after page, reading journal articles and watching videos. I read a journal article that said people never fully heal from childhood sexual abuse. This was a powerful moment because I knew it wasn't true. I knew it with every cell in my body. I knew at that moment that I was going to heal.

Even though Tami and Teresa had no proof of knowing I had been angry at them, I wrote to them. I explained how I had felt rage and thought terrible things about them, realized it was misdirected, and how very sorry I was. They both wrote very gracious and forgiving responses, which was one humbling step forward. Some wise part of me stepped in and knew better than to disrespect these women, even if in the silence of my home.

Chapter 17- Health Care

I had made an appointment with an energy worker recommended by a friend who claimed she was a miracle worker. I had decided *she* was going to be the one to fix me. Her appointment on my calendar gave me something to hold on to. It was the date I was going to be cured. I dressed myself up in a nice outfit and felt confident this was going to be it. When I arrived at her office, and she opened the door to let me in, I was taken aback. I'm unsure what I expected, maybe a pointy hat and a broom. I did not associate energy medicine with a sheik modern young woman, which is what she was. She already knew what I was going through because I had told her everything in an email when I reached out to her to schedule the appointment, she asked me if I was still seeing a therapist. I said no and explained how I had resigned from my job and the therapist had come and gone with the job. She sat up and, in a serious tone, said,

“I was under the impression that you were seeing a therapist, and I wouldn't have agreed to see you if I knew you were no longer seeing one. Ethically, I am not sure I can see you.” My stomach constricted, and I became desperate.

“Teresa, the therapist I was seeing, would come and get me if I needed her. She would drive down here this second. I know she would” I believed myself because I was going to get fixed, and it would happen today. She looked suspicious.

“I suggest you see a therapist once if not twice a week.” She advised with authority.

“I will; I have some numbers; I am just waiting to get another job and get insurance” These were all half-truths because I was sure I would be fixed after today and wouldn’t need a therapist. She continued to interview me, and as I explained more about what had happened to me, she responded with absolute confidence and without missing a beat,

“What a horrible man!”

I recoiled in denial.

“Well, it wasn’t really like that. It was more complicated than that”. I defended. I couldn’t yet accept that he was, in fact, a horrible man. Part of me still believed I needed to protect him to keep myself safe. I was pushing down and minimizing the horror of what I had experienced and how it was connected to the anguish I had lived with. Looking back, I don’t think she was trying to convince me of anything. I think she was speaking to a younger part of me who experienced him as a monster, and she was affirming the experience of that little girl inside me. I also think she was gauging where I was in my unraveling, and my reaction to her words was all she needed to know. I wasn’t very far along.

Her office was, like her, beautiful and stylish. There was a giant raw crystal sculpture and a simple and stunning painting of an owl. The decor was tasteful against the tall polished industrial rock walls. She was dressed in wedge boots and a gorgeous felt poncho. Her hair was pulled back cleanly, and her make-up was perfect. She was classy, and I was glad I dressed up to see her. Maybe I had fooled her. Perhaps she

wouldn't know I was worthless and unfit for this treatment and luxury. Obviously, she wasn't fooled. The answers to her questions revealed what type of treatment I expected and tolerated. She wasn't fooled, but she did, however, see my worth. It was time to lie down on her massage table. She explained some of what she did may seem weird or woo-woo and how she may make some sounds or walk away from the table as she was working with me.

"I don't think it is weird" I was sincere.

"OK, good, so I'll be starting at the crown of your head and placing my hands on you like this," as she modeled light pressure on my scalp. "I'll work my way around various points on your body." Earlier, I had explained to her that I had pain in my right ovary area, and the thought of her touching me was a no-go.

"Um, nobody touches me in my stomach area. That won't work for me," I said without hesitation.

"Oh! I'm glad you told me. Let's talk about that".

"Yeah, I am very sensitive, and I will flinch, and it makes me sick to think about being touched anywhere around there. I have always had pain there, and once I had an ultrasound that wasn't supposed to hurt, but it was agonizing. They never found anything".

"Uh, huh, well, I certainly won't do anything you are uncomfortable with, but this work is going to be much more powerful if I can make contact. I can show you first what it will be like, and you can tell me if it works or doesn't work". Her words eased

my concern, and I agreed. She showed me and explained to me what she would do, and this demonstration eased my mind completely.

“That will be OK. I trust you.” I concluded.

“That’s good.” The session went ahead and lasted about an hour. I felt nothing other than what one would expect when receiving light touch. I didn’t feel like I was fixed, and I didn’t feel any release or relief. When the session ended, she asked me if I felt anything, and I said no. She said some people don’t feel anything, but it doesn’t mean nothing happened.

“From my perspective, A-LOT happened.” She said this in a way that made me believe her but also in a way that made me think that whatever she felt was happening in me was still huge. It was supposed to be almost resolved, not still huge. “I strongly advise you to get back to seeing a therapist. You should ABSOLUTELY be seeing a therapist. Sometimes after a treatment like this, you might feel depressed or you might feel unsteady. A therapist can help you through this. It is absolutely essential that you see a therapist.”

“OK,” I was already sweeping her advice under the rug. I wasn’t going to need a therapist. I’m not that kind of person. I am tough. I was handling this. She made a few other recommendations, including a type of meditation that had already been recommended to me by two different people. I decided I would try the meditation, but not counseling.

I met with the meditation teacher at a coffee shop. I arrived a half hour early, and she too had arrived a half hour early, and we ran into each other in the parking lot. I recognized her from her website, and I introduced myself. Inside I was coming apart by I had gotten in the habit of dressing myself up and trying to fake it when going out in public.

We ordered coffee, and she treated me to a pastry before we found a seat inside. She sat across from me, her silk scarf wrapped around her neck. She had sparkling milky blue eyes framed by her silver hair. My eyes welled up when she asked me about myself, and my heart started to race. She was not rattled. She spoke about the meditation practice, and as I looked into her eyes, all I could see was my mother's face, and I had to look away. I shouldn't be with this woman. I should be with my mother. She saw the distress on my face and said just enough to comfort me without pandering to the helplessness I felt. She offered to let me pay her for the meditation course in installments.

On the day of the meditation initiation, I woke up feeling unsteady. I felt lost and alone and as if the day-to-day world was irrelevant. I dressed myself up, and I tried to compose myself. The pain inside me was not letting up, and the walls around me seemed closing in. My relationship with my mother was hanging on by a thread. One by one, everyone was looking the other way, and door after door was closing. I had nowhere else to turn and just hoped this would be the thing to fix me.

Winding up the forested driveway to her home, I passed giant-sized sculptures of Indian deities. I didn't know much about Indian spirituality except what I had started learning in the yoga training in Donna's dusty apartment in Leon. Pulling up to the house, my stomach ached with shame for driving such an old, beat-up car. She would see I was hopeless and that I didn't belong.

When I got out of my car, one of the giant wood doors opened and outran a big white curly-haired dog. He ran up to me and nuzzled his head to my leg, excitedly circling around me. I wasn't usually comfortable with dogs, but this dog was so pleasant and friendly. I petted his shoulders and patted his back, feeling a little steadier.

Teresa came out after him with a calm smile, welcoming me in. She asked me how I was doing, and tears began to fall.

"Not good," I gasped, surprised at my inability to contain myself.

"OK, yeah. Come in, dear" Her steadiness helped me to regain a sense of mine.

Walking into her house was like dropping into the deep waters of Tahiti to snorkel. It was overwhelmingly beautiful and dizzying. I instantly thought of my mother and how I didn't deserve to be in such a beautiful place without her. I was proud of where I came from, didn't need all of this, and didn't belong here. I held back the tears. She showed me to the yoga studio, which took my breath away again. Large windows looked out onto the gardens and expansive views of the valley. A large brass dancing Shiva, an Indian deity, a statue with fresh flowers strung around its

neck, stood in one corner. Soft music and a light scent of incense barely hung in the air. Once I sat down, she explained the meditation and where it originated. We went over to the Shiva statue and performed a ritual with many different steps, much of which I didn't understand, but included some chanting in Sanskrit. Here I was again. It was just me and a yoga teacher in a room, chanting. I had been in this situation before in Nicaragua, and it was spiraling around again in a powerful way.

The beauty of the studio, the ritual, and the magnitude of what I was going through started to catch up with me. We returned to sit in chairs to begin the final section of the teaching, and I could not hold my tears back anymore. When I looked at this woman's face, it transformed into my mom's face, and my heart couldn't take it. Tears poured down steadily, and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

“Do you want to share what is coming up for you?” She asked tentatively

“When I look at you, all I see is my mom. I just wish she could be here to experience something so beautiful,” I managed between sniffing and sobbing.

“Your Mother is a lucky woman. Someday, my dear. Someday”.

I didn't understand her words, but they helped to stop me from turning into a puddle on her floor. I took a deep breath, and my exhalation shook.

She had given me an apple as part of the ceremony and said to be sure to eat it that day. As I left, I looked her in the eyes, begging for help.

“What am I going to do?” I pleaded with her.

“Steady. Right now, you just need to stabilize.

Practice your meditation, and I will see you next week for the next session.”

“OK, thank you,” I replied, as a twinge of familiar anger nagged at me because I was not getting the answers I was looking for

On the way home, I ate the apple and tossed the core out the window and into the woods.

Chapter 18 - Raw

The meditation wasn't fixing me, and all other doors had closed on me. There were none left to knock on. The money from a couple of friends wouldn't be enough to pay my bills. I lay in bed whimpering until day turned to night. I did not eat. I did not sleep. The night turned back into day, and I just lay there, unable to move. The pressure in my head was building. There was no one left to call. Maybe I should see a doctor after all? Perhaps I should try to get a diagnosis of PTSD and try to get financial support with that diagnosis. Maybe it was impossible to escape the system that had never shown any care or respect for me. Maybe I had to go back in. My mind scanned for other possibilities over and over and over.

I was humiliated. Scared. Alone. Nearly out of food. Nearly out of money. The day turned back into the night, and I still hadn't eaten, and I still hadn't slept. Strained tears and empty sobs were all that was left of me. I could not sleep, and my head was pounding and spinning until finally, the only other option occurred to me. Maybe ending my life was the solution. It would put everyone worrying about me and uncomfortable with me out of their misery. It would stop all the judgment and worry coming at me from all sides. Maybe it would solve this. I started thinking about suicide. I imagined driving up to a campsite in the middle of the woods. I Googled how to commit suicide. I took a box of photographs from under my bed, and as I

flipped through them, it seemed to confirm my fate. I was looking at the photos as if I was looking at someone who had already passed away. My tears dripped onto the smiling faces in the pictures. This is how it ends, then. This is what happens to people who speak out. I get it now.

The night turned into morning, and I lay shaking in my bed. The sun was shining in through the cracks in the curtains. Despite the warm and hopeful rays of morning light, it still felt comforting to imagine ending my life. Deep down, I knew suicide wouldn't solve anything, but the idea of it provided a slight sense of relief. A voice inside told me very clearly that if I committed suicide, I would drop right back into life with the same pain and probably even more. As I sat up in bed wondering what to do next, my phone buzzed with a text, and the sound brought me back into a world I had been drifting away from. It felt surreal to pick up the phone. A friend was texting to ask me how I was doing. I responded honestly and said, not good. She replied that she was on her way over, and I insisted she stay away, but she said she didn't want me to be alone. It wasn't like her to make spontaneous visits, which made me feel paranoid. Was this all a sick game that everyone was in on? When she showed up, I awkwardly told her that I was having thoughts of suicide, which was true, but I also knew I wouldn't act on them. She asked me if I wanted to go somewhere to get help.

“Where?” I choked out between sobs. “There is no help.”

“Call Teresa Megan. Ask her what to do” She knew Teresa from before she quit the same job I had quit. I didn’t know what else to do, so I took her advice, and I called Teresa and left a voicemail after not seeing her since I left the office two months earlier. I said I was having suicidal thoughts and didn’t know what to do. She texted back and told me to go to the local crisis center or the hospital’s behavioral health unit. She wasn’t coming for me. I wasn’t unique. I was helpless and worthless, and nobody was coming for me. I didn’t think poorly of Teresa. I wasn’t under her care and wasn’t upset, even in desperation.

“Do you want to go to the ER, Megan?”

“What do you think? Do you think if I get a PTSD diagnosis, I can get financial help or qualify for some other type of support?”

“There you go. At least you are with it enough to realize you have to go into the system to get help,” She stated as if she had thought about it before and was sure there was no way out without going in.

She drove me down to the ER, near the University Campus, where I went to grad school, just a block from where my friend Sean and I would sit and drink pitchers of beer after class. Sean had also been to a psych ward since I’d known her. We were known as the smart girls. Why did the intelligent girls end up in the psych ward?

Maybe because to be a woman in this world, you have to dull your intelligence and put blinders over your eyes to survive. Neither of us was good at that.

The ER waiting room was lit up with fluorescent lights, harsh and unforgiving. The sun shone through the sliding glass doors adding to the humiliation and exposure of broad daylight. The receptionist, a woman about my age, asked me about my insurance, which coincidentally was expiring the next day. She asked me what my emergency was, and I explained what I was going through in awkward and plain words. I told her I remembered my father had sexually abused me as a child, and I was having suicidal thoughts. She asked me to take a seat without flinching, in a language that was sanitized and sterile. I could feel her exchange glances with a nearby nurse as if to say, how pathetic. I was still expecting kindness. I was such an idiot. Did they know how horrible this felt? Why was everybody treating me like I was embarrassing myself?

What the fuck did I have to do with this? Who wouldn't I react like this to such an unthinkable tragedy? I would have received support if I had lost my family in a car accident, but this only seemed to repel people. It was as if they were all secretly cringing, thinking Oh God, how painful that she hasn't learned to keep this kind of thing quiet. Why was I expected to keep something quiet I had nothing to do with? The pressure to just shut up and move on was powerful and aggressive.

“You can leave me,” I said to my friend sitting beside me in the waiting room. “I don’t want you to see this,” I continued pathetically sobbing.

“I will tell you if this is too much. I’m ok. I’m staying.” She had also had her struggles with suicidal thoughts in the past. Also a brilliant talented woman.

My name was called, and a grumpy nurse called me back into a wide cold hallway. She explained that I would have to strip down completely and put on scrubs and a pair of oversized white briefs that she was handing me. I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of getting undressed. I went into a brightly lit, cold, empty emergency room holding cell to change. I felt like I would throw up having to take my clothes off. The baggy briefs and paper-thin scrubs left me feeling open to harm and disgusting. My head was pounding now, but my heart had gone silent. It wasn’t racing. I couldn’t feel it at all. My friend was allowed in the room to sit with me. There was no furniture, so we sat silently on the cold tile floor. Why was I here? What had I come for? Care? What was care? Where did you find it?

The wait for the doctor’s drug was on, and the silence was interrupted by wails from a woman in a neighboring cell. She was swearing and screaming for help.

“You should go,” I insisted again

“I will go if it gets to be too much.” She sounded certain yet shaken.

“Well, if life reflects back to you the contents of your psyche, this is a pretty good reflection of how I’m feeling inside,” I stated in a moment of strange clarity.

“Ha, right, nothing like bouncing off the bottom.” Her comment started a trash blaze inside of me because that wasn’t what I meant, but I had no energy to be upset, and I let the statement go. She was doing her best to help. I was not totally clueless to the higher nature of what was happening – how the trauma inside me was coming up and being mirrored back to me in the outside world. This understanding did little to stop the suffering and nothing to stop it from continuing to unfold. Suddenly an announcer came over the loudspeaker, and alarms started going off in the hallway. “All visitors must leave immediately. This is a lock-down. All visitors must leave now”.

“What the fuck?” I looked at her wide-eyed, and her face matched my disbelief. She gave me a hug and said she would call me.

“Go,” I said.

As she was leaving, the alarms stopped, and over the louder speaker echoed the voice of a priest. It was a Catholic hospital and a familiar prayer filled the cold air. Someone must have died. About an hour later, a nurse set a food tray on the floor across the room from me. I was freezing, and I asked for a blanket. She returned with one and left it beside the food without approaching me. Shortly after, a doctor came in and introduced himself. He kept his distance standing near the doorway, looking

down at me as if he was in the room with something contagious. He asked me about my medical history and said he would get the social worker to explain my options to me. Another hour passed, and the tears had stopped. I just stared at the wall. If there was a basement of hell, this must be it.

Eventually, a woman my age or a bit older entered the room, and she, too, stood at a distance. However, she seemed less cold and less uncomfortable than the doctor. She asked me some questions, and I told her what was happening.

“Look, here is what I think. I think you are a strong woman who is going through something really difficult. Really really difficult. I know you can’t see how, but I think you are going to get through this”.

I threw my head back in frustration and managed another round of desperate sobs. She sighed and told me there was the option of being admitted into the behavioral health unit, which would be very expensive. I wouldn’t be able to leave or eat what I wanted or have visitors, and there would be distraught patients such as the one we heard screaming all morning.

“Are there any other options?” I pleaded pathetically. “Isn’t there any other help? What if I got a PTSD diagnosis? Would I qualify for better care?”

“The doctor here can’t diagnose that. You would have to go to your primary care doctor. Honestly, most doctors aren’t familiar with what you are going through. It may take a long time, and there really isn’t any other care besides counseling”. She explained honestly.

“This is fucked up. There is no care. What is someone like me supposed to do? I have no money; I have no job; I have no family. I am just going to be left out on the street, and I have done nothing wrong,” I cried helplessly.

“What do you want to do?” She knew there was nothing left to offer.

“I want to go home.” I whimpered

“You can go home,” she said softly

This was it. All the torture and humiliation for nothing. I’ll show them. I’ll kill myself. The thought barely held water. I knew I wouldn’t, but I did want to. The idea of it felt good. It felt soothing to think of this all being over.

“I’ll return with some resources for you. Some places for you to call”.

“Fine” I wished I could be kinder to her. What a difficult job she had. What unimaginable pain she encounters. When she returned, she had a stack of papers that included numbers for low-income counseling, housing support, and crisis response

centers. The doctor joined her and gave me a sheet of paper that had information about some type of nondescript stress condition that didn't require medical intervention. They both left the room, and I sat there for another half hour before it occurred to me to ask for my clothes back. The door was unlocked, and I asked the nurse for my clothes, and I went into the bathroom and changed. I came back out and asked her if I could leave.

“That's up to you,” she said in a cold, mocking tone. I walked out the door where another friend was waiting for me in the lobby. She had been called to take over the next shift with me. I don't think I cried. I just followed her out to the car.

“You don't know what to do, but we know what to do” She sounded unconvincing, and I could feel that she was scared. I just stared out the window.

“I want to go home and go to bed. I want to be left alone”. When we returned to my house, I turned off the lights and collapsed.

“Megan, can I reach out to the women in the last email you sent about the money? Can I let them know what is happening?”

“Whatever, I don't care.” None of this was correct. Nothing mattered. Let the humiliation continue.

As day again turned to night, the fires of hell flared up again. Someone had told my family what I was going through, and I was angrier than ever.

The phone didn't stop buzzing as the text messages started pouring in. First from one sister, then another. Then from my mother.

"I'm coming to see you," a text from my sister read. My eyes burned hot as coals and cobras may have well shot right out of them as I read the words.

"Stay away, I mean it. If you come, you will make this all worse. You won't be able to find me anyway. STAY AWAY." How dare my friends do this to me, I thought. Everyone keeps sending me back to the people I am trying to escape. I emailed the group of women, scolding them for breaking my trust and involving my family. I told them I did not want my family involved and wanted to be left alone. I did not sleep again that night. Instead of pathetic, depleted tears, my body boiled and writhed in anger. The fire burned all night, and the pain of morning light stung deeper than ever, but I had no choice but to face the day. My friend Cheryl showed up – a new friend for a new shift – bless their intentions- and even though I wanted to be left alone, I felt I had no choice but to let her in. I curled up in bed and sobbed as she rubbed my back and said soothing words. Her hand on my body revolted me, which motivated me to get up and deal with this more practically. We sat on the couch, and I showed her the papers the social worker had given me. We made a plan to go visit all of the

places and see what support was available. I told her I could see that everyone was worried and I could see that everyone was trying to help and that it was selfish of me not to try. Still, inside, I was reminding myself why ending my life sounded so appealing. It would ease the pain and discomfort my existence was causing everyone else.

Chapter 19 - Short Circuits

Cheryl offered to drive me to the various counseling and crisis organizations listed on the social worker's sheet. The first stop was a non-profit housed in a plain office building. There was not a cell in my body that wanted to be doing this, but I felt obligated. We checked in at the front desk. I explained I was feeling quite desperate. I was worried about myself and was looking for counseling or other help. It was a short wait before a young man who looked barely out of his teens called me back into a room. His nails were painted, and his hair was styled to fall in front of his eyes. He wore skinny jeans, and his cheeks seemed to still have baby fat on them. I was a woman volcano old enough to be his mother, and I felt I could destroy him with just one breath.

I imagined leaving him sitting there like a singed tree scorched by a wildfire. He was at his computer and said he needed to ask me some questions, and I managed some pathetic tears as I rehashed what I was going through. He tried to keep a steady voice, but this was clearly out of his territory. I could tell he had been trained on how to respond. After asking me a series of questions, he asked me how I felt. I quite frantically and somewhat sarcastically told him I was not feeling well. I had to hold back from rolling my eyes as if it wasn't obvious I wasn't in a good place. He said, "I hear you saying you are feeling very worried about money and you are feeling scared

and sad.” I may have slipped and rolled my eyes as I recalled the therapeutic reflective listening strategy he was using that I learned in my graduate course on counseling.

“Yeah, yup, you got it.” His childlike demeanor made me sober up, and I wiped my tears and sat up straight. “What resources do you have available?”

“I’m going to see what is available. While I do that, I’ll show you to our respite room. Would you like anything to eat or drink?”

“No, thank you, and thank you for your help,” I said as sincerely as possible. I waited in another room where one other man, who appeared to be quite disheveled but in a different way than me, ate a cup of noodles. His clothes were stained with dirt and tattered, and his shoes were worn down. His hair was long and messy, and his head turned from side to side as if he was having a silent conversation with himself. I did not feel above him. I was very near to him. I felt a stone’s throw away from being homeless and talking only to myself. I was slipping through the cracks. This is how it starts, I thought. We are not very different from one another, and he probably didn’t get the help he needed early enough.

When the young man came into the room and called my name to return to his office to review the resources, I felt a twinge of hope. I sat down, and he handed me a paper with Catholic Charities’ contact information. He said sometimes they offer rental assistance. “Mmm hum.” You gotta do better than that kid. I nodded, and he

picked up on my dissatisfaction and handed me the next page for the Goodwill Job Connections. He said Goodwill offers jobs to people who are struggling. My face must have said it all. He squirmed in his chair, and his voice cracked as he tried to stay calm. I felt utterly clear-headed now and needed to get out of there. I thanked him, and my thick hot, overflowing volcanic pain left his office. Cheryl was looking at her phone, and she looked up as I walked out, and without even saying anything, she got up and followed me out.

“Jesus, what the fuck” I said as I handed her the papers.

“Goodwill Job Connections?”. She scoffed in disbelief, just as flabbergasted as me.

“I’m so sorry,” She consoled me. “He was a child... a child”.

“Let’s go to the next place,” I said as I landed heavily in the front seat of her car. I managed a few more strained sobs as I placed my head in my hands.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” Let’s go to the next place.

We pulled into a quaint home-like office that looked more welcoming than the last place. It was a counseling center that offered sliding fee scales. We walked in and up to the front desk, and a small woman with gray hair greeted us sweetly. I felt a sigh of relief to see an older woman. I explained to her that I was in crisis and looking for

counseling, and I didn't have money or insurance. She said she was sorry I was hurting and gave me their flier. She explained I would likely qualify for counseling, but there was a wait to get on the waitlist, which could be up to six months.

Feeling whole-heartedly victimized and entitled, I fought back, "What am I supposed to do? There is no help. What is someone like me supposed to do?" I begged as if my problems were infinitesimally worse than every other person that walked through her doors.

"I'm sorry. The need is so high. You are right; there is not enough help." I believed her. She was being sincere, and it was true, and I was also radiating with a kind of spineless self-pity.

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry, I'm just so frustrated". I pleaded for her to see I wasn't hopeless.

"You are welcome, and please let us know if you want to get on the waitlist." We walked to the car silently, and I unloaded myself onto her front seat again. She asked what I wanted to do next.

"I don't know...fuck. I don't know. Can we go to the store, and I'll get some food?"

“Sure; where do you want to go?” Fuck me, I don’t fucking know, I thought. I could have exploded.

“How about that Albertson’s over there?” I said with all the fake patience I could muster. She was trying to help. We walked into Albertson’s, and the bright lights stung my red eyes. I must have looked scary. I hadn’t eaten or drank or slept in days. Please, Lord, let me escape this grocery store without seeing anyone I know, I prayed as we rounded the corner and ran straight into a former colleague. She was a fellow speech therapist who I knew well enough that I had to stop and talk to her. I couldn’t duck and run. When she saw me, her face lit up, but when she looked closer, it became contorted with concern.

“I’m not having a great day,” I said.

“Oh, Megan, I’m sorry. Can I do anything?” she said sincerely.

“No, thank you,” I sighed. I just need to rest. You wouldn’t believe these last few days.”

“Ok, well, it is really good to see you, and I hope you feel better.”

“Thank you, Pam,”

We continued walking, and Cheryl and I exchanged, ‘Can you fucking believe this day looks. We went to self-checkout. I had a bottle of 7up and a few cans of soup. I just wanted to get out of there. I scanned the soup. Beep. Scanned the next can. Beep. Scanned the 7up. No beep. Tried again. Nothing. Tried again as my blood began to boil. I tried again and again. Nothing.

“God damn it,” I tried again as I considered smashing the 7up bottle and this fucking machine into a million pieces. Nothing.

I took a deep breath and gently swiped the bottle one more time. An automated voice from the machine loudspeaker said, “Help is on the way. One moment, please. Help is on the way” It was a cosmic joke, and I raised my eyebrows and looked at Cheryl. “Bull-shit, help is on the way,” I said sarcastically, and she burst out laughing. Something shifted inside me, and I may have even given her a bitter smile. We got back in the car. I landed a little lighter in the seat, and in an upbeat, cheerful voice, Cheryl carried on,

“Where to next, my dear?”

“Take me home.”

“Yep. You got it.” She exhaled loudly. Her tension snuck out amidst her brave exterior. I returned to my house, thanked her, and begged her to let me be. I promised

her I was ok. She was hesitant to leave me, but I convinced her I was fine, and when she finally left, I collapsed on my bed. Help was not on the way. There was no help. Nobody was coming to save the day. Although drained and exhausted, I felt some strained jittery-eyed desperation ease up. I was starting to accept that I would have to get through this. The world wasn't going to stop or even slow for me. I stared at the ceiling and felt my heartbeat returning to my chest and I let out a sigh.

I lay there and drifted in and out of sleep when my phone buzzed from a text message. Dread filled my stomach as I picked it up. I had to read the words three or four times before the meaning started to take shape in my mind. It was a fellow speech therapist asking me if I was interested in part-time work. She said the director of her son's school contacted her, looking for a part-time speech therapist, and she thought I would be a good fit. I sat up. My brain was so foggy, but I had to write back. I had to do this. I went to the bathroom and splashed water on my face before responding. I was interested and she gave me the number to call. By the end of the day, after a few informal conversations, I was scheduled for orientation. It would pay very well, and I could work as much or as little as I wanted. It wasn't a full-time job and I could work at my own pace and schedule. This, I knew I could manage.

It was a miracle.

The next day, on the foot of this good news, I invited three of my women friends and former officemates over. They were all still working together and still seeing Teresa, the organization's therapist I had begun seeing before I quit. We sat on the warm pavement and soaked in one of the first sunny days of spring. I told the ladies what I had been through at the ER. They listened, and one said she had seen me slipping but didn't know what to do.

"It happened fast. There was nothing you could have done," I assured her. Part of me was still hurt from them not loaning me money, which would fester for a while longer. However, I knew they had their reasons, and I knew it would pass. Being in the presence of these women was the first thing that had felt right to me in days.

"Megan, have you asked Teresa if she can see you privately?" Tif prodded.

"She can't see me," I responded.

"Megan, but have you asked her?" She didn't let up.

"Yes, we said our goodbyes. She can't see me."

"MEGAN, BUT HAVE YOU ASKED HER?" She persisted, and finally, I allowed myself to think about the question for a moment.

"Actually, I haven't asked her," I admitted, surprising myself with my answer.

“Call her now. “She insisted.

“Megan, call her,” The other women echoed.

“Call her Megan; I don’t know why she wouldn’t be able to see you.”

“I’ll email her.” I gave in.

“Do it now,” Tif commanded.

“Ok, ok” I pulled out my phone, and the fear of rejection almost stopped me.

What if she says no. She knows I’m helpless. She knows I’m pathetic and that I’m fucked up. She knows I’m a fraud. I pulled up her email as the woman sat watching over me.

Hi Teresa, it’s me, Megan. Things haven’t been going so well, and Tif suggested I ask you if you could see me privately. I thought you said you couldn’t, but I realized I never asked.

Within an hour, she wrote back and said she could see me, and we scheduled for the upcoming week at her home. When I told the women, they exhaled in relief. I have no doubt they all slept better that night.

I arrived at Teresa’s house nervous and hopeful. I had started my new job, and I had started a meditation routine, and I was hanging on, but only by threads. Teresa’s

house was peaceful, although seeing her personal items almost made her seem too human for my comfort level. In the office, without her personal items surrounding us, she appeared steely, God-like. Her tender humanness peeked through here in her house, which I didn't want to feel. It was all that I was trying so desperately to avoid inside myself. Her sweet dog came and sat next to me on the couch, putting her head on my lap.

“She knows.” Teresa began our session.

“She knows when someone needs love?” I responded. Teresa shook her head as she looked over me with her blanket of care and attention. I told her about my visit to the energy workers, the ER and the different agencies I had visited, and the new job.

“You had these big experiences and didn't have anywhere to land.” I didn't know if she really had faith in life or had just gotten good at acting like she did. Whatever the case, it was deeply comforting. We talked about the job, and she quickly pointed out how miraculous it was. I agreed. It was a miracle, and I couldn't fully appreciate or feel it, but I was very grateful. I went on to tell Teresa I was having horrible nightmares about my parents.

“I'm just trying to tell myself that this is part of my psyche and not real,” I explained. “If I think of my mom and dad suffering, I can't handle it,” I strained.

“Well, that is a good strategy,” she assured me calmly. “Look, Megan, it might feel like we aren’t going to get too far today, but we need to build you back up, so that is what we will do.”

“Ok,” I said, trusting her completely, but wondering if it would be the next session that she would fix me then.

“What am I going to do, though?” My family, I can’t handle it. My once best friends, I can’t handle. The pain. The money. The humiliation. I can’t take any of it. “How do I figure this out? How do I handle all of this? What do I DO?” I begged her. She paused.

“You don’t figure this out.” She stated as confidently as if it were a fact. It wasn’t her words but the palpable faith behind them that touched me deeply. “You don’t handle this.” She said again. Silence filled her living room as my desperation for her to save me rose briefly again and fell still. “Do you have some incense?” She asked calmly.

“Yes,” I answered, curious about where this was going.

“Can you burn some incense and walk around your house saying, I let everything that needs to go, go, and I let everything that needs to come, come?”

“I can do that,” I responded, although part of me was thinking, that’s it? What is she talking about? Hell with it, I’m all out ideas of my own. As I was leaving, she said,

“I would give you a hug, but I’m still recovering from a cold.” I squatted down to say farewell to her dog. As I petted her and let her nuzzle her face near mine, I glanced up at Teresa. Her attention and care surrounded me like a warm blanket - her eyes were milky translucent sparkling blue. The eyes of the old sailor in Tahiti. I had to look away.

Chapter 20 – Mine Fields

I started my new job at the school for children with Autism, the position which had fallen out of the sky and into my lap. To my surprise, I liked it. Having a job had always felt to me more like a punishing obligation than a privilege, but I did love working with children with Autism. Never mind my ability to help them, these students were medicine for my ailing soul. They are honest and authentic and respond well when their unique needs and interests are honored and respected. They were a breath of fresh air. Besides the students, the work was flexible. The school was in the country outside the city limits, and I loved the drive and winding along the river and through the hills to get there. Maybe things were settling down. Perhaps I was almost fixed.

One evening after a staff meeting, I arrived home after dark. The property we lived on was surrounded by a tall fence that separated my cottage from a dark alley. At least a few homeless men were sleeping in the alley every night. I did not feel scared living there, but on this night, as I was walking towards the fence, my heart started racing when I noticed a light was on in my storage area. I knew I hadn't left it on. I paused for a moment as I reached into my purse for my keys, feeling my heart beating out of my chest. I was getting so tired of this anxiety. I was annoyed at constantly

being triggered, so I decided to override my fear, storm through the gate, and confront whatever it was. If someone was in my house, I would eat them alive. I was fed up. I swung open the fence door, letting it slam behind me as I approached the storage unit door. I had a white-knuckle grip on my keys and struggled to get the key in the lock before flinging the door open. The light was on, but nobody was there. I flipped the light off, and with the same fury, I unlocked the main entrance to the cottage and stormed in, turning on all the lights as I went from room to room. Nobody had been in my house. I could tell. I collapsed on the couch, exhausted. This was the last thing I needed. My mind couldn't rest, and I quickly started to problem-solve. I figured it must have been my landlord who let himself in my storage area. He was the only one with a key, and it had been locked. I texted him and asked if it was him, and he said yes. I was angry he let himself into my storage space without letting me know. It felt as if someone had stepped inside my skin. I texted him back and asked him to please let me know before he let himself into my space. He always wrote me back right away, and this time, he didn't respond, lighting another round of fireworks inside me. It just wasn't going to quit. I wouldn't have said anything in the past because I wouldn't have wanted to make anyone uncomfortable. Still, there was no way I would let this go.

I requested a meeting with the old man and our other landmates. My elbows and knees were shaking, but I requested to receive notification if anyone was going to

enter my space in the future. I told them I had been spooked by the light, and it did not feel good to have people entering my space without me knowing.

“But it is just me,” he said childishly. His words felt like gasoline had been poured on the fire burning inside me, and my face turned red hot with rage. It was a familiar attitude, although it wasn’t until later that I realized how far back I had been living with this type of familial excuse for invasion and disrespect.

“I don’t care who it is; I want to receive notice.” I doubled down, my heart racing even faster.

“We are going to have a problem then,” he threatened.

My entire body lit up with repulsion, and it was everything I could do to not flip the whole dinner table over. What my body heard was, if I don’t get access to you, you will be punished.

Kira, who lived with her boyfriend in the big house, said, “Whoa whoa, hey. Umm, I think it is reasonable what Megan is asking”

Thank God, a voice of sanity. What a relief to have someone sticking up for me. The old man didn’t let up.

“That is not how I operate. We trust each other here. I told her when she moved in that I would be going in”

“YOU DID NOT!” I snapped before he could finish what he was saying.

“THAT IS A STRAIGHT-UP LIE! I would have never agreed to that!” I spat uncontrollably

“Well, that is what I remember,” his voice whiny like a seven-year-old. We were both behaving like children. Kira’s boyfriend spoke up in a calm voice,

“Well, we can’t go back; we can only go forward. So going forward, can we agree we are going to let each other know before we enter each other’s spaces?”

“No, I have a problem with that. I told her that when she moved in, I would be going there to check the meters”. I couldn’t take it anymore, and I stood up.

“I gotta go. I am not in a good place to talk anymore. I gotta get out of here” I ran back to my house, where I ripped the blankets off my bed and started pounding the mattress and swearing. My heart was racing, and I felt like something inside me was clawing to escape. My need to smash something felt bigger than me. Hitting the mattress was just unsatisfying enough to make it worse. I dropped to my knees and grabbed my hair,

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Why????” My rage turned to sobs, and then my sobs turned to begging for the pain to go away. Eventually, I collapsed on the floor, numb and exhausted.

When the fire had burned through to smoldering ashes, I ran a hot bath, and as I lowered myself into the water, I closed my eyes and finally relaxed. If I could only stay under the water forever.

I didn't sleep that night. My eyes were stinging from tears, and my mind was still searching for ways to escape. I could not live here anymore. I thought about Nicaragua, Mexico, and California, but these ideas quickly sunk in. I scrolled through Craigslist to see if I could find a place of my own so I could live alone again. I was out of money, but I would be getting a paycheck again soon, so it was possible I could make yet another move work. I tossed and turned until the sun started to peek through the curtains. I had to call in sick to work because I was too tired to think or move.

I continued to panic- scroll Craigslist, and to my surprise, a new ad for a studio at a low price popped up. I responded instantly and said I was a single working professional woman looking for a safe and private place. The homeowner wrote back right away, and we made an appointment to meet the next day. By that evening, my immune system tanked, and a full-blown flu gripped my body. This was just a couple

of weeks before the pandemic reached the US. I slept the rest of the day and all through the night. I texted the person from the ad to let them know I probably shouldn't come because I had the flu, but they insisted I needed to go if I was serious about it. My nerves were shot, my throat and chest burned, and my eyes were puffy from tears. I choked on a nasty cough every few minutes. Still, somehow, I managed to put myself together and drove across town to the apartment. A fit older woman came out to meet me. She must have been in her late sixties or early seventies. She had a pixie haircut and stylish hiking clothes, but her deep eyes spoke of her years.

“I'm so relieved you are a woman.” These were the first words out of my mouth.

“I'm glad you are a woman, too,” she said in a surprisingly deep voice. “I liked what you said in your email, and I just had a feeling.”

“Yeah, well, it's been kinda a crazy time, and I just need somewhere quiet and safe. I just got a new job. It pays really well, but it's new, and it's temporary, so finances are a little uncertain right now,” I explained honestly without trying to sound fearful.

“Well, I need someone who can pay the bills” Her tone turned harsh

“I mean, I can pay the bills; of course, I can,” my voice quivered as I defended myself

“OK, well, let me show you the place, and we can see.” She said somewhat suspiciously. I had blown it. I shouldn’t have said anything about my situation. We toured the small apartment, which was perfect for me, but more importantly, it was an escape. We sat inside her house, which was attached to the apartment, and reviewed the rental agreement.

“Can I ask you why you are moving?” She still sounded unsure about me. I didn’t have time to collect my thoughts and nervously spouted, “Yeah, the landlord I am living with wouldn’t agree to let me know before he came into my space. He is creepy, and I want out of there” I should have stopped there, but I kept talking

“To be honest, it has been a really hard time. I just moved back from Nicaragua and had a new job, and then I found out all of this stuff about my childhood, and I resigned from the job, and now this.”

“Ahhh doing some healing?”

My heartbeat slowed. She got it. She understood. I prematurely assumed.

“Yeah, yes, I’m doing some healing.”

“Well, I’d love to have you here, so if you want it, it’s yours.”

“Yes, I do want it. The only catch is that I have to put in my 30 days, and I see you advertised that it is available now.”

“Why do you have to put in 30 days? He violated your rental agreement. The law says landlords have to give notice before entering the tenant’s space. Look, coming from a wise woman, don’t let him push you around.”

“Right. You are right,” I agreed, although something about her pushiness stirred me. Ignore it, Megan. You are being paranoid. This is perfect. We signed the papers, and it was official.

I put in my notice, and the landlord acted dumbfounded and innocent, but he gave me my deposit back to avoid legal trouble. By the time I moved my belongings, I was so far beyond exhausted, it hurt to keep my eyes open. After returning from work, I immediately put on my pajamas and crawl into bed. I felt I had to sleep every spare second to survive. I could barely think about my family and friends and all that had happened. I could only think about work and sleep.

News of the pandemic was just beginning to spread.

I had been in the new apartment for about a month when the lockdown took effect. I had already called in sick the day we got the news schools were closing. I am not sure if I was ill or if, like many people, I just started wondering if I felt sick. Not

having to go to work was a massive relief on the one hand, but the eeriness of the global crisis was disorienting. I liked my new job, and I desperately needed the money. I was walking on razor-thin ice when it came to finances.

On the other hand, it felt like a miracle to stay home and rest. The school was going through the chaotic process of switching to online classes, and amid the turmoil, I got laid off. I was relieved to step out of the storm and to collect unemployment until things settled down.

During the lockdown, there were periods when I would feel the need to sleep for two or three days in a row. My landlady had decided to stay with her sister in Los Angeles, and I was glad to be alone on the property. I felt I could sleep as much as I wanted without anyone judging me. It is all I really wanted to do. I just wanted to sleep. I tried not to think about what I would do for work, but my mind went scrambling for ideas and a plan forward. I could start my own private speech therapy practice. I didn't feel passionate about speech therapy. Still, I felt passionate about being seen as successful and proving I could figure this out. When I had the energy, I started building a website. I figured unemployment funds would tie me over until I could build up clients. I felt I had to make my future happen, and I needed a plan as much as I needed food and water to survive. None of this proved true. None of my fretting and planning did anything to alter the future. Conventional wisdom was losing its power over me, but I didn't know that yet.

Ever since the ER visit, I had stopped hearing as much from friends. I had asked that they give me space, and I was given space for a couple of weeks, but it didn't last. One evening a series of texts from my grad school friends came in one after another. It was clear that they had been talking about me since they all decided to text me the same night. It didn't feel like they were showing care, although I know they meant to. It felt like they wanted nothing to do with my situation but that they would feel too guilty if they left me alone. I know their intentions were good, but it made me angry that they were talking about me behind my back. I didn't have the skills or wherewithal to address them tactfully, so I told them to leave me alone. Fuck-off and leave me alone was the island I was arriving on. The only person from my intimate circle with whom I kept an open line of communication was my mom. At the time, asking for space from my mom was a physical, biological, and moral impossibility. Every couple of days, I would receive an email from her asking me how I was doing or telling me a story about my nieces and nephews. My knees buckled when I saw her name pop up in my inbox, and news of the kids made my heart feel as if it would stop beating. It all hurt so bad. Opening the emails from my mom made me feel like I could die. I didn't know what to do about her. Dying was not an option, but neither was separating from her.

The lockdown went on, and the days somehow did too. I had an equally hard time thinking about the past as I did the future, which left me with no choice but to take one moment at a time.

One afternoon, the internet wasn't working in my apartment. I called my landlady, who said I could let myself into her house and reset the router. I didn't like the idea of going to her place, and my stomach tightened in dread at the thought of it. I walked across the patio, and when I opened the front door, I felt a wave of eeriness hit me, sending a chill up my spine.

I breezed by a shelf with family photos on it, and as much as I tried to ignore it, they caught the corner of my eye.

I didn't stop and kept walking upstairs to find the router, where I fumbled nervously with it until it was reset. On the way back down, the family photos pulled at me again, and this time, I couldn't resist stopping to look at them. As I studied her family, I remembered she had told me that she had a son my age and was getting a divorce. It was his photo that had drawn me in like a magnet. He was handsome, and the thought of him lingered in the air momentarily before I snapped out of it and hurried out. Once I was back in my apartment, I locked the door behind me, breathing a sigh of relief.

Coincidentally, the next day I received a message from my landlady that her son had been laid off and had decided to come and stay at her house while she was away. I felt a knot in my stomach, and a wave of giddiness overtake me. The cute single my-same-age son was coming to live next door, and I had sensed it, so it must have been ordained.

Later in the day, I was heading out for a walk, and a jeep pulled up the driveway. A man with shaggy sun-bleached blonde hair and an exuberant smile sat behind the wheel. I tried to stay calm, but my heart raced, my head filled with fog, and my throat constricted, so I could barely swallow. I waved, put my head back down, and kept walking as he drove by.

My body was shutting down, and my mind was already telling a love story. I started wondering if this new man who was already causing me so much anguish was the happy ending to my horror story. Had my prince arrived to ride me off into the sunset, saving me from this nightmare? As I walked down the driveway and around the corner, I could barely stay in my skin. My mind skipped frantically from one thought to the next, like a car radio scanning for a radio station to come in. I wondered if he had picked up on my nervousness. I didn't have the option to drink my carnivorous butterflies away anymore, and this level of discomfort was new territory. Something about his smile told me he was familiar with this type of reaction in women, but I pushed that thought right back down. When it was time to walk back

up the driveway, I felt my stomach knot up again. I could hear him unpacking his jeep. As I approached, I stopped to introduce myself. He paused unpacking and stood tall with a wide stance and bright smiling eyes. I can't remember what I asked him; I just remember he started talking about himself.

“I own my own business and travel all over the world teaching people disaster preparedness,” He boasted, seemingly more interested in the arrival of his own presence than my company of mine.

“Oh, wow, that's awesome,” I squeaked. He kept talking, but I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying.

“Well, cool, it's nice to meet you” I hurried along, trying to escape further humiliation.

“Nice to meet you,” he grinned as if to confirm that it was nice for me to have met him.

I went inside and collapsed on the couch, my heart racing faster than I could catch up with, which turned into wheezing. We were in lockdown. There would be nothing to do, nowhere to go, and we would be within a stone's throw of each other. Even though I was on the verge of a panic attack, my mind went right on celebrating what I thought was the miracle I had been praying for. He was the one who would fix me! A

little voice inside me piped up again and whispered, “You know he is phony,” Like a whack-a-mole, I slammed it back down before it could say anything else and ruin my new fairy tale.

I would read or do yoga on the patio in the coming days, hoping he would walk by, which he inevitably did. Our interactions were brief and strained. I tried to play it cool, but I would blurt out awkward comments to show him I wasn’t impressed by him and consequently make it even more apparent I was like every other girl who had a nervous meltdown around him. Part of me loathed him, but part of me felt magnetically drawn to him.

I started seeing Teresa twice a month, and I was sure I was almost fixed. I could barely contain my excitement to tell her about my new apartment and my new crush. My face turned red just talking about him. The “giddiness” felt like anxiety mixed with a soupy fog.

“The universe is certainly clever,” she stated in her usual steady, grounded way.

“Right?” I said excitedly, nearly bursting out of my chair for the moment she would tell me this is how I would heal. Through love. Isn’t that what everyone says? Love heals. My excitement was soon to deflate.

“Megan, sometimes giddiness can be a trauma response. We can confuse attraction and danger,” She stated clearly and calmly, knowing this truth was going to be hard for me to swallow. My throat constricted, and my eyes darted back and forth, avoiding her gaze. I suddenly felt exposed and naive. I had the urge to defend myself, but by this time, I knew the truth when I heard it. I was too sober now to ignore it. I knew she was right. My heartbeat slowed down, and the excitement quieted into dread, and then an unbearable yucky feeling of poison being in the most sacred and intimate parts of my body took over. I started to process the implications of what she had said. Part of the realization was immediate. The connection between my body alerting me of something dangerous and the confusion that it was love could be traced to my childhood. It was too much to take in, and it made me sick. I hung my head. She didn’t rush to make me feel better and instead sat quietly and allowed me a moment to arrive in the disgusted feelings which had been buried in me for so long. Teresa reminded me that I could take this hard work slowly. These were the feelings that drinking was helping me avoid. These feelings had made me sick for years, but I hadn’t been ready or able to face them. Teresa sat with me and didn’t say much, but I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to do this without her calm, non-judgmental presence, care, and wisdom.

Most of our session was silent, and by the end of our time, she suggested I start thinking about the patterns I have had with men and write some things down and see

what I notice. She said not to force anything but to see what information I got. I agreed, and I initially thought there wasn't much left to discover. This had to have been the worst of it.

“I can tell you already that my pattern has been to meet someone drinking at a bar or at a party who I didn't really like at first and sometimes even dreaded, but I would end up blacking out and sleeping with them, and the next day I would wake up in bad shape, feeling attached and eventually getting my heart broken even though I never really like them in the first place.” The words poured out of me without knowing why I was saying them. Her gaze was steady, but my words meant something to her.

“OK, Megan. Pay attention, see what comes up, and reach out if anything.”

It always made me nervous when she said that because I was sure we were through the worst of it, so what could the ‘anything’ she was referring to be that I might have to reach out for?

“OK, I'll be fine.” I defended myself.

“I agree, you are going to get through this, Megan, and I want you to know that you can reach out if you need to.”

“OK, thank you, I will.”

Later that evening, I started to write about my past patterns and relationships with men. I thought back to my encounter with Ty, the ex-boyfriend of the woman who took my job at the new station. I remembered him walking towards me at the bar with a relaxed grin. I remembered the dread taking over me and then cowering back over my drink, wanting to hide. This was the last thing I remember of that night before blacking out and waking up next to him. I realized this memory was connected to my childhood memory in the bathroom. I remembered again the bearded man with a relaxed grin walking towards me. It was my father, and the little girl was embarrassed as her shoulders and head curled toward the floor. Up and away, she flew until the memory went black. I kept writing and filling pages and pages and pages of every trauma I had ever experienced.

My writing revealed patterns of sexual trauma, lies, infidelity, physical violence, emotional neglect, and psychological abuse. The horror of these events and patterns had been swept under the rug, denied, or underplayed as normal. When I mapped these patterns onto my pain and early years, it clicked why the visual memories were so fragmented and why I was making excuses to myself why it wasn't that bad. The

realization that I had consistently blacked out (what I later learned was called ‘disassociation’) as a child shook me even harder than the initial memories. I couldn’t see many memories with my mind’s eye, but I could feel them in my body. It had all been so much worse than I could stomach. I couldn’t seem to grab my breath. Every cell in my body pulsated in disgust, and I could not escape the feeling of being violated. It seemed it would never end, and I prayed and prayed and prayed to whatever was out there to take the pain away, send me a miracle, and make it all go away. As the information unloaded itself onto the pages, I didn’t notice the toll it was taking. I stepped away from the writing, but I couldn’t sleep and felt aches and pains pressing against every inch of my skin, and I felt foggy and drained. I tried unsuccessfully for the next few days to snap out of it.

I started feeling like I did before I went to the ER, so I reached out to Teresa early. I wrote to her and told her that once all the trauma was written out on paper, my life looked more like a horror movie than the “normal” life of a popular athlete from a perfect family. I don’t remember what she said, but it was enough of a lifeboat for me to hold onto until we met again.

I was physically very weak when my appointment to see Teresa came around. I could barely form a coherent thought. I had no energy left, and my heart was beating off what must have been adrenal residue. I don’t remember everything Teresa said to me, but I remember her saying that the floodgates had opened, and I was no longer in

denial. I thought I had faced the worst by confronting and cutting off contact with my father. I didn't realize the trauma had mass and weight and could only be released a little at a time. Teresa saved my life that day. I was on the verge of total system shutdown. I could see how easy it would be to become ill or give up on healing trauma altogether. I didn't need medication, but I did need Teresa, who understood what was happening, to be with me through this.

The one thing I remember from the session is deciding to spend time in the forest, listening to music, leaning against the trees, and asking the trees to help renew my strength. Teresa suggested that when I was on walks, I would repeat, "The trauma is leaving my body. The trauma is leaving my body". I also remember her reminding me that this was the opportunity to use every tool I had in my toolbox, including my yoga breathing. She was right, and in the coming days, I needed every tool in my toolbox to get a deep enough breath to catch some energy. After several days of feeling that I was barely hanging on, little by little, I started coming back around.

My energy was returning, and whenever energy returned, I would become over-confident. I was almost fixed. The pain in my side was becoming less concentrated, but now my lower back was aching to the point I could barely stand up.

It may be a sign that I was on the verge of a breakthrough and that everything was about to pop or somehow suddenly resolve.

One afternoon I was checking my email, and there was a message from my landlady. I clicked it open, and it was a short message asking me not to put things in the recycling that didn't belong. Without me being able to catch it, I was engulfed in flames. My cheeks flushed, and it felt as if I had been stabbed in the gut. It had been a polite mundane request, but some part of me took it as a full-on assault. It was a massive trigger from a tiny event. The reaction was so strong and so fast.

I had been doing so well, but this seemingly small thing sent me spiraling. Luckily, I was meeting with Teresa the next day.

I told her what had happened and how the pain in my lower back was screaming at me. She asked me if I wanted to tune into the pain. I said yes, of course, not realizing what I was about to find.

I put my hand on my heart and shut my eyes. She asked me what age the little girl was who was screaming at me, and to my horror, the answer came to me as if the little girl was right there in the room. Teresa walked me through my first encounter with the child inside me, and this child took me right back to the bathroom in the home where I grew up. The little girl sat with a blank stare on her innocent little face, not knowing what had just happened to her, and my heart broke. I sat with her and

cared for her the way a child should be, following an unthinkable violation. I sat with this younger part of me, washed her, dressed her, and got her out of that house. I wrapped her in blankets and took her somewhere safe, far away from that house, the man who hurt her, and all the people who knew something wasn't right but looked the other way.

This was the day I started to learn how to listen to my pain and to connect deeply with the parts of me that had been hurt. It was something that, in the past, I would have never done and would have thought was too uncomfortable. But now, the little girl inside me was alive, almost tangible, and clear with her messages. She would take me back through the house I grew up in and show me books she used to read and places she used to hide out. She would answer my questions and tell me what she needed to say. It was so strange but so visceral. I realized nobody else except me could give her the care and compassion she needed. Teresa couldn't give it to her; she could only guide me to give it to her myself. All of this had come about from a situation that seemed so mundane and unrelated. It was a crucial lesson to understand that now that I was away from those who initially hurt me, anyone and anything could re-activate those body sensations. Now, it wasn't as much about the trigger, but the current situation provides a window into understanding the feelings and where they originate from so that they can be resolved.

After big revelations like these, I would be exhausted. I slept the entire afternoon, and the only other thing I did was go on a long walk each day. Besides Teresa, what helped me the most were sleeping and walking.

Even though it was a significant expense, I decided to start seeing Teresa weekly. I was laid off, and my unemployment hadn't come through. I was finally beginning to surrender to the fact that this wouldn't be over or fixed anytime soon, and my hastiness wasn't helping. I had to put my growing faith in and invest everything I could into doing what was best for my long-term health and not for the bank account. I had to trust that if seeing Teresa served my highest good, then it served the good of all, and I would find a way to pay. I didn't feel worthy of seeing her weekly or feeling good for my own sake, but I was starting to see the logic in investing in one's long-term well-being. Childhood sexual abuse physically shapes us into believing a warped morality that says we exist for the comfort and service of others. It is tough to prioritize our comfort and well-being even if our mind knows better. I knew with my intellect that our culture and our societal systems reinforce these beliefs, but it was challenging to make the connection to my day-to-day actions. The subtle parts of my physical makeup, such as my nervous system, developed around the central experience of having no power and no sense of safety. At the cellular level, I internalized the belief that denying oneself to others was natural and noble. I was starting to understand all this in my mind, but my body needed to learn it, which would take

time. Maybe a lifetime, and I was beginning to be OK with that. Unlearning the hurtful things I had been taught was more meaningful than any fairy tale could ever be.

The coming weeks and months didn't exactly get any easier, but my evenings became quiet and peaceful, and when I put my head on my pillow, most nights, I slept deeply. I thought back to the years of sleepless nights, and I realized, despite the intense and seemingly insurmountable difficulties of the future, part of me was more at ease than ever.

I had to address my relationship with my mother.

My mother, who I felt connected to, in the deepest part of what was left of my heart. It couldn't keep going on with superficial emails and text messages. I was trying to stay connected to her, although thinking of her drained me of the little energy I was working so hard to generate. She seemed to try her best and would say anything to keep me. She begged me never to leave her. The thought of my mother helpless, worried, heartbroken, confused, and stuck with this man sucked every ounce of strength from my bones. When I read her emails, it was as if my heart was uncorked, and my life energy swirled around down the drain, leaving an empty shell and my head full of fog. The pain of what felt like love for my mother brought me to my knees. Was it her pain or my pain? Were love and hurt the same? It was all mixed up.

One afternoon, overcome with grief over missing and feeling sorry for my mother, I fell to the floor in my bathroom as desperate tears tried to push their way out. My body was trying to catch up with the anguish welling inside me, stuck behind my eyes. I pounded the floor as the desperate sobs eventually burst through. I told myself I was done with healing. I couldn't do it. I would move back to Nicaragua. I would get in my car and just start driving. I'd go to Baja. I'd go anywhere. I'd disappear. I was done with Teresa. I was done with facing the truth and facing reality.

I couldn't do this anymore. I melted into a spineless puddle on the bathroom floor when suddenly I heard a voice inside me speak up, clear as day. She said, get-up. Get up, and don't you dare even think about walking away from Teresa. Get yourself up right now. Get yourself up and get yourself together. We are not going anywhere, especially not backward. We go forward. My eyes blinked off the tears, and as I sat up, I felt my helpless part become small like an ant. I got up, showered, and put myself together, never allowing such thoughts to return. My mother was my mother, but she was also a grown woman, just like me, living with her circumstances. I couldn't be responsible for both of us. She either didn't believe me, which was no basis for a relationship, or she did believe me and didn't want or know how to leave him, which was also no basis for a relationship. I knew no explaining would help, but I emailed her a few simple words: I didn't see a healthy way forward between us and didn't want to stay in contact now. I didn't open her last email and never received another one.

The pandemic slowed the world down, which was long overdue. Things had been going too fast for too long. The sudden halt seemed necessary. As spring turned into summer, unemployment benefits never arrived as promised. Once again, I was on what felt like the verge of homelessness. My landlady had returned, and I didn't tell her I hadn't gotten my unemployment because she already seemed suspicious of me. While she was well-intended and tried to be a kind and generous woman, I felt her fear. I continued to pay rent with the bit of saved money I had borrowed and the little earnings I had saved from my temporary job before getting laid off. Weeks went by, weeks turned into months, and my little money was running out. I was paying for my visits with Teresa using the last credit I had available on a credit card. I was using every mental trick imaginable to not spin out in fear. There was nowhere to turn anyhow. I had already borrowed the maximum I could from my few remaining friends. Starting a job during the pandemic felt out of the question. As summer turned to Fall, I maxed out my credit card and shamefully asked Teresa if I could wait to pay her until my unemployment came. She said that was fine. I also decided to tell my landlady I was out of money and would be late on rent. I emailed her, and she responded kindly that it was OK and that I could pay her late when the money came. Her understanding meant everything to me.

The next day I was sitting out on the deck reading a book by a Buddhist teacher, and the words felt like they were dropping sustenance directly into my soul. The days

were so hard and painful, and when I would find something comforting, it was like finding food when on the brink of starvation. Every crumb meant so much to me. On this day, the words of this book and the sun on my face felt like life savers. My landlady came out to work in the garden.

“Thanks for the email,” she said coldly, gruffly. “That is crazy you haven’t gotten unemployment yet.”

“Yeah, it sucks, but I’m not worried about it. As you say, trust in the universe” My voice cracked. I was picking up on her negative tone.

“Well, trust in the universe, OK, but you also have to do something about it. Have you called them?” She was working her way into a scold. My stomach turned onto itself, and the worry and shame I had been fending off flooded over me.

“Yes, of course, I have called. I have written senators, and I have called many times. I have done everything humanly possible. You can’t get through, and they just keep saying it’s coming”. I defended myself

“Well, you have to do more. You should drive to the capital and knock on doors. You need to do something. You can’t just sit there and wait”. I think she was trying to bring a take-no-shit warrior energy to the situation, but all I felt was attacked and judged.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. Maybe I should do more”. I went silent.

“I hope that book helps you.” She mocked, and the knife of these words cut through the thin layer of strength I had been working to rebuild around me. I couldn’t hold back the tears, and they started rolling down my cheeks.

“Hey, I’m sorry” She barely softened. “I feel bad now; I’m just trying to help.

“This is really stressful, OK, and I’m trying to have a good attitude” My insecurity revealed itself, which she clearly despised.

“I’m sorry, I was just trying to help.” She responded without any evidence of tenderness. I walked into my house without saying another word to her. My heart was racing, and my mind was coming up with a hundred ways to explain to her how good I was and how unjust all of this was. I wanted her to see how we weren’t that different and how I didn’t deserve this. I tried to explain to her how strong I was for going through what I was going through and facing what I was facing. I opened my computer, desperate to make my pain go away by explaining myself to her. I wrote a long email about how those of us from less privileged backgrounds needed help; this was everyone’s problem, not mine. I sent her copies of the letters I had written to senators and asked her to call the senator if she wanted to help. My email fell flat, which was becoming a familiar scenario. My over-explaining emails always left me more frustrated and feeling more misunderstood than ever. She wrote back something

unemotional, and I felt ashamed for having reacted. She had said things since I had known her, like, “trust the universe,” “love wins,” and “nature heals all,” but what she really meant was to pay the rent and leave me out of it. I don’t blame her. She may have been taken advantage of, or who knows. Fair or not, I felt like a victim; the victim is the other half of the perpetrator. I needed to eliminate all the energy in my body that felt like a victim to get rid of the perpetrator. It is true, I had been a victim, and it is true, it wasn’t fair, but the victim energy had to go.

When the unemployment funds finally came, I ate the last portion of beans and rice in my cupboard. I had accepted that I may sleep out of my car before this was all said and done. If that was my fate, that was my fate. I would rather accept my fate than stay in unhealthy relationships and situations. Furthermore, I just couldn’t bear worrying anymore. The money arrived a few days after I cozied up to the idea of accepting my fate unconditionally. I paid all my debts to friends and Teresa and caught up on my bills. I felt secure again, although some part of me never felt at ease around my landlady after that.

My rational brain wouldn’t allow me to think wrong of her, but the younger part of me wanted to get away. With every passing day, I was becoming more devoted to meeting the needs of the child inside me. So I questioned if I wanted to stay living there. Part of me loved it. It was near some nice trails, and it felt safe and serene when I was inside. I decided to talk to her and let her know I wanted to evaluate if the

situation was a good fit for both of us long term. I told her I wanted to get a kitten and that I wanted to fix up a few things on the deck if I was going to stay. She said she would think about it. In the meantime, I started looking to see what was out there on Craigslist and came across another cooperative housing situation. My last attempt at community living had gone sour, but this cooperative was well-established and had been operating for nearly twenty years. I thought maybe it would feel safer due to the democratic systems in place and the intentionality around conflict resolution. I imagined a cooperative in one of the West Coast's most liberal cities would have long been down this road of awakening. I would give myself the space I needed to heal. I reached out and responded to the ad, and within days, I met the landlord and started the lengthy interview process. My insides churned with doubt and dread, but all the outer "signs" pointed me toward this new living situation. I decided it was calling me and said yes to the eventual offer to move in.

When all the signs point to a situation, I have started to trust; it is pointing me to where I need to go. However, it doesn't mean it's going to be a cakewalk. It might just mean I am ready to burn off more of the garbage buried inside me.

The first few weeks in the new house felt hopeful as I learned about everyone's triggers. The concept of "triggers" was new to me, so even though I felt late to the healing game, I was happy to be arriving. Phil didn't like it when people touched him, got too close, or reached over him to get a sponge when he was doing dishes. His whole body would stiffen, and in a low voice, he would tell you not to do it again. Kayla didn't like going over budget on the food. Smoke would come out of her ears, and her hands would shake. Shane didn't want to be questioned about his recycling chore. If you mentioned it, he could barely keep his eyes from being swallowed by the back of his head. Daryl almost had a heart attack if he saw you wasting a scrap of food. He would lunge at you like a panicked vulture, flapping and screeching in the name of a tablespoon of curry. In my mind, I thought, hmmm, OK, well, there seemed to be a lot of awareness of triggers. I thought healing meant resolving your triggers, not just knowing about them, but maybe we hadn't gotten to that part yet.

The cooperative side of the living situation operated on schedules for cooking shared meals, shopping, chores, and all practical things related to daily living. When it came to my turn to cook a meal, I was more excited than nervous. I remembered how much pressure I had put on myself in Nicaragua and vowed to not take myself too seriously and have fun with it. I decided to make soup, but I didn't follow a recipe. It was a chance to work on staying calm in a low-stakes situation. After all, this was a

progressive “woke” household, and it was just soup. I played music and spent the afternoon happily chopping vegetables and learning how to use the bread maker.

I was so excited to eat together, and I cheerfully explained what a good time I had prepared the meal. It was a huge accomplishment to enjoy cooking. I was met with blank stares and felt the tugging in my gut. I just tried to breathe and ignore it.

As everyone started dishing up, I walked over to the sink to finish up some dishes, and in the reflection of the window, I saw the house owner take a spoonful of soup and smell it. As he inhaled, he lifted his nose in disgust. He exchanged a disapproving look with another housemate, who smirked in agreement. The burn pile inside me lit up, but I tried to stay calm and tell myself I would deal with whatever was coming up for me later.

I held myself together at dinner, and then later that evening, I went to my room and broke down. I cried and cried. I felt humiliated. I texted my women friends to vent, and they thought I had misinterpreted the situation. My reaction was disproportionate to the offense, but I had interpreted the situation correctly. Over time, I realized that the house owner felt a sense of pride in his sophisticated culinary skills, which were a central part of his identity. The other housemates got swept up in the antics because it served their best interest, just like in a family. A dysfunctional system brings out the worst in all of us.

As the weeks passed, some days at the house were fine, but most were infuriating. I made a couple of great friends and was starting to make a couple of great enemies. I was trying my best to make it work. I could not entertain the idea of moving again. Little did I know, there were many moves yet to come.

In therapy, I expressed my frustration to Teresa. She often surprised me with her unconventional suggestions, which was part of what made her a great fit for me. She suggested I smash a coconut to release the vile energy I felt toward the landlord. After our session, I read online that breaking coconuts is an ancient Indian spiritual ritual. It explained that these types of physically oriented activities can help you bypass the thinking mind and shift subtle energy in your body quite effectively. It sounded strange and foolish, but nobody seemed to have better suggestions. Blowing up at each other, smoking pot, drinking, taking anti-anxiety meds or anti-depressants, social media tirades, and stuffing our feelings were all the methods on the socially accepted route, but those routes were dead ends now. Smashing organic matter made more sense than anything else. I thought about it, but I wasn't ready yet.

One afternoon, a series of events unfolded, leaving me feeling like an angry rattlesnake who had just been pissed on and then locked in a shoebox. I had spent several weeks creating a website, which I suddenly lost access to it and then spent hours on the phone with tech support trying to retrieve it without success. I ended up rudely throwing down the phone and hanging up on the guy who had been patiently trying to help me. Furthermore, one of my housemates was giving me the silent

treatment for asking that she not play the bongo drums outside my bedroom window at night, which she considered a totally unreasonable request. To top it off, the toilet overflowed, and I had to get on my hands and knees and literally slop up my own shit. By the afternoon, I found myself beyond my wit's end and ready to unleash on someone. I decided to walk to the store and buy a coconut to smash because Teresa was the wisest person I knew and If I didn't do something, I would take my rage out on somebody and make things worse.

It was a hot summer day, and tensions were high because of the ongoing pandemic and social unrest. I headed to the small local all-organic, all-peace-and-love grocery store.

My heart was racing, and I was trying to take deep breaths to calm down. As I approached the tiny, crowded parking lot, I slipped on my mask, which added a subtle feeling of claustrophobia to my already delicate mood.

I went inside and quickly walked to the produce section, scanning for a coconut but landing first on a honeydew melon instead. I didn't look at the price or care; I just needed to get the hell on with it. I went up to the check-out stand, and as the young man scanned the fruit, I swiped my food stamps card. I was on food stamps, which didn't feel very nice either. He commented on how good the melon looked. Without thinking, I reacted honestly.

“Oh yeah, well, I'm not going to eat it; I'm going to smash it.”

The young checker's face recoiled in disgust.

“Well, some of us don’t have the privilege or funds to go around wasting food,” he pronounced as if his words were bravely delivering the long overdue social justice the world needed.

I didn’t respond because the heat in my head was burning my brain circuitry. My heart was pounding out of my chest. My mind raced, thinking of ways to defend myself. I didn’t say anything, and when he gave me my receipt, I stormed out of the door and sped walk up the street before stopping to sit on a park bench. I pulled out my phone and called the store to complain about his rudeness. I steamrolled right past my rule about trying to avoid communication when triggered. My hand was shaking, and the call went to voice mail. I decided to email instead. I wrote a long email rant from my phone about how he didn’t have any business commenting on what I used my food for, and I demanded he needed to call me to apologize. I explained how I had been dealing with trauma from my childhood and that “wasting” a melon was ultimately better for the environment than holding trauma in our bodies because, after all, we are an extension of our environment. Send! They never did write back. I don’t blame them. Not because I didn’t have a point, I usually did have a good point, but I had some work to do on my delivery.

After I pushed send, I was weak and shaking. The rage rant hadn’t helped at all. I soon found myself on the trail in the woods up behind the store. My heart continued to race, but I was determined to smash the fucking honeydew. I rounded a corner where a giant boulder caught my eye. I took the melon out of my bag and lifted it

above my head, arms shaking, to smash it on the rock. I released it, and instead of the cathartic impact, the melon missed and rolled down the trail. Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me? I said to myself, not seeing the humor in it. I ran after the melon and grabbed it again, walked back up the trail, lifted it above my head with my spaghetti noodle arms, and released it.

This time a corner of the melon nicked the side of the rock before tumbling again down the trail. My brain had fully melted at this point, and everything went red. I grabbed the melon again and walked back up to the rock and lifted it above my head the final time before finally contacting the rock and smashing it to pieces. I sat down, unloading my weight and resting my head in my hands. Fucking fuck fuck fuck. It was the only word available. Amid the tirade, I heard a little chirp and looked up to see a squirrel on his hind legs nearby looking at me.

“You eat it, little squirrel.” I picked up a piece of the melon. I was going to toss it to him, but I stopped and decided to take a bite. As the juicy flesh hit my lips, I paused. Oh shit, it *was* a delicious melon. I reached for another piece that had scattered nearby. Something had shifted, and I realized the joke was on me. I laughed at myself for getting so roped, although it wouldn’t be the last time. I grabbed another piece of melon and tossed it out in the woods for the squirrel.

After only a few months at the house, despite trying everything I could to make it work, the household's dysfunctional "family" dynamics were too much for me to navigate. My patience and energy deteriorated, and I found myself in constant distress to the point that I was finding it hard to eat and sleep. I started, yet again, looking for a new place. Finding a home that felt safe on my budget with a body full of burning trauma bursting out of my pores wouldn't be a cakewalk. I didn't know where to go; I just knew I couldn't stay there.

After a few days of panic-scrolling Craigslist, I found a temporary room for rent in a little town in the country. It would have to be good enough until I found someplace long-term. When I arrived, the owner told me there was a yurt in the backyard, and she said I could stay there if I wanted more privacy. I had always wanted to live in a yurt, although I thought it would be in the woods and not in the middle of a small conservative town like the one, I grew up in. The thought of my hometown gave me a shiver. The familiar wide streets with no sidewalks were foreboding, but I quickly took her up on the offer. I didn't have any other choice.

“No dark lasts forever. And even there,
there are stars”

Ursula K le Guin

Chapter 20 - The Beginning

The yurt was dusty and full of old furniture, bongo drums, and eclectic artwork. It wasn't ideal, but I was desperate, and it was private and affordable, so I asked the landlady if she would rent it to me monthly, and she agreed. It had a wood-burning stove, a full kitchen, and an outdoor shower. I spent the first few weeks cleaning the cobwebs off the rafters, dusting the old furniture, scrubbing the walls, and putting away some of the clutter. It was just the beginning of spring, and the evenings were cold enough that I had to make a fire and get up at night to keep it going so it wasn't freezing cold in the mornings. I would sleep in late and then spend long mornings sipping chai and staring out the windows of the French doors at the birds in the willow tree. My plans to start my own business kept hitting roadblocks, so I eased off the efforting and tried to trust that what I was supposed to do next would make itself

apparent. My will had weakened. The weeks turned into months, and soon it was summer again. I was getting by from pandemic aide and could not afford to go anywhere or do much of anything, which was probably for the best so I could recuperate. I was enjoying living in the yurt even though it was by no means a forever home, but it was a refuge for a while.

The yurt had screens instead of windows, and a fresh breeze was constantly blowing through. The sunlight came in through the round window at the apex of the roof, and it traveled like a sundial, tracing its path along the oak floors from sunrise to sunset. I loved the smell of the cut firewood and breathing the fresh air. My days were carried along by an undertow of grief and the occasional moments of after-shock at what had happened to my life, but otherwise, they became generally peaceful. As the pandemic wore on, I found myself increasingly isolated. Teresa was injured and unable to see clients for the summer, and my women friends were on their summer family vacations. I had entered a time of solitude. The days were slow, like dripping honey, and it would sometimes feel like, within one day, many years had passed. Nothing was happening outside of me, but on the inside, lifetimes were moving through me.

I didn't notice it happen, but at some point, as these unhurried days turned into the night when the world had become quiet, and the demands of others had ceased, I realized something. I was thinking back to my travels and how I had always felt that I had been on a desperate journey to escape the tension of waking life. I thought I would find it in a man, a job, or an accomplishment. Here I was, in the darkest, most

difficult days of my life, with none of those things, utterly humiliated by societal standards. However, I was no longer searching or being pulled outside of myself. There was nothing left to escape. I don't know what a soul is; I just know I wasn't searching for it anymore. As the volcanic material inside me – the trauma -was making its way out of my body, something that felt subtle and essential was returning to take its place. I still felt an aching desire for life to feel better, but it was different. It was correct.

I had only surfed a couple of times since the eruption nearly two years ago, but it had been a disturbing experience because it hadn't brought me any joy. Something that had been so powerful and that had always brought me to life didn't seem to help when things were at their worst. I wasn't sure if I would ever enjoy surfing again, but I would occasionally check the forecast. One evening, I checked, and the waves looked like they would be just right for giving it another try. It wasn't even surfing that interested me as much as the thought of being in the ocean. I felt the tug that it was time to go. I reserved a campsite near one of my favorite surf spots and packed my things to camp and surf for a few days.

The next morning, I got up at dawn and loaded the car. The sun was just rising, the air was fresh and soft, and the only sounds were a few birds singing. I could feel everything inside me saying yes, which was such a rare feeling these days. This last couple of years had been all about saying no. I made a mug of hot chai, strapped my board on the roof of my car, and drove the back way through fields of farmland,

where giant hawks sat on the telephone poles scanning the crops for their breakfast. As I wound my way up and over the forested coast range, I could feel the ocean pulling me. I was excited, but I didn't have a racing heart. I made it over the mountain range, and as the bright blue water finally appeared on the horizon, I gasped, as I had every single time I got to that point in the drive. I stopped at a surf spot, and the waves looked nice, and the sun was already warm and burning off the morning chill. I decided to wait to surf until the tide was higher later that afternoon. I took out a giant tapestry and my big straw hat and went to the beach to read my book. As soon as I lay down, buried my feet in the warm sand, and felt the sun heating my back, I fell into a sleep so deep and restful that when I woke up, I felt I had traveled to the center of the Earth to nap. I stretched my arms above my head and looked out towards the sparkling blue water before laying back down, shutting my eyes, and allowing myself the pleasure of waking up slowly. When the sun was directly overhead, I went to the campsite and set up my little tent. I spread a tablecloth over the picnic table and filled my little ceramic vase with water for the wildflowers I would pick when I went on a walk later. I had my rituals when I went to the beach, and it wasn't lost on me that I felt utterly content. I ate the lunch I had packed and read my book until I felt the tug, and something inside me perked up and said again, it is time to go. This happened a lot with surfing. When it was time, it was time, and I knew it. I hopped in my car and drove down to the cliffside beach, where the waves were small and friendly. The parking lot was about three-quarters full, relatively empty for late summer during the

middle of the week. I parked my car and pranced across the street to the ledge that overlooked the breaking waves below, and I could have squealed from delight. I wiggled my way into my wetsuit, and savored the smell of the neoprene as I squeezed the hood over my face and around my neck. I was breathing easy, my mind was sharp and clear, and there was nowhere else on Earth I wanted to be. I scooped my longboard under my arm and walked towards the wooden stairs to the water, took a few deep breaths and then walked into the sea. This was one of my favorite parts of surfing. I walked slowly, carrying my board under my arm until the water was covering my legs, then I slapped the board down and kept walking until the water was up to my waist, up to my chest, and I couldn't touch anymore, and it was time to hop onto the board. The sandy bottom disappeared beneath me, and I let go of control and let the rip tide carry me along the jagged, towering rocky headland. It felt like entering another world. Once out beyond the breaking waves, I sat up on my board and shaded my eyes from the sun, gazing at the horizon. I took a few waves and was glad I remembered how to surf and that my body felt strong. The crowd continued to thin out as the sun dipped down and the water changed from clear aquamarine to shimmering petals of silver and gold. I was grateful that there were waves to surf, but I couldn't help hoping they would get bigger. As I stared at the setting sun, it was as if the ocean had heard my endearing plea, and I noticed the water rising slightly against the horizon. I started paddling a little further out. My eyes hadn't fooled me, and a nice-sized wave formed. I paddled towards it and right over the top, feeling the spray

on my face as I dropped over the other side to glimpse the next one, which was even bigger. I turned around and started paddling, and after a few strokes, I felt myself being lifted by the pulse of the wave. I took a few more strokes and jumped up. There is a split second in surfing when you jump up to stand and have no idea what will happen next. Will you glide, or will you tumble? My board hit the face of the wave, and to my delight, I slid down the face and towards the bottom of the wave, where I pushed myself back up and felt the power shoot me forward. My hand reached out, and I ran my fingers through the wall of water. I heard the voice of a surfer who was paddling out past me say, "Holy shit," as I flew by. The ride wasn't over, and I felt another push as the wave reformed and reshot me down another wall of water before its power dissipated. The wave felt like it was laughing. I jumped off the board and splashed both of my fists in the water, ecstatic. Looking up towards the sky, I shouted, and as I did, I heard the echoes of other surfers shouting, cheering, and sharing in the moment. I didn't want to rush back out, so I sat in the knee-deep water and let a couple of waves crash over me. I floated for a few moments longer before pushing my board back over a couple of waves, hopping back on, and paddling back out. The sun was even lower now and dipping behind a layer of clouds. I paddled by the few surfers left in the water, and nothing was said, but we exchanged genuine smiles. I sat back up on my board and looked around, the water was now the texture of liquid metal, and a sheen of sparkling emerald and silver danced around me in all directions.

Her power, beauty, and perfection were beyond words, and even though the colors, textures, movement of the water, and the salty air was pouring in through my senses, it could only be touched by closing my eyes. It could only be experienced from the inside.

That evening I made a fire and hot chocolate, and as I sat staring at the dancing flames, I didn't feel a need for anything else in the world. My muscles were tired and happy, my stomach was full, and the warm drink tasted better than any glass of wine I had ever drunk. When I looked up at the sky, the treetops formed a circle around the view of the twinkling night sky. I sat at the fire for a long time, watching the wood burn down, and the coals transform until my eyelids became heavy. I crawled into my sleeping bag. As my head touched my cool pillow, I nestled my face into it, feeling as if I could melt from happiness from the deep tiredness and knowing that I was about to fall into a deep and peaceful sleep.

The following morning, I made a chai, and as I opened my book to start reading, I stopped and set it back in my lap. Something was occurring to me. Sadness lingered for all that had been lost, but I realized I was no longer haunted. What terrorized me for so long from within was now starting to weave itself into the light of day. I leaned back in my camping chair and looked up at the treetops. My body was healing itself. It was healing itself slowly in its own time and at its own pace. I had survived the eruption of my lifetime. So much had been demolished, but there was no longer any

doubt that, in the bigger picture, it was nature's way of healing herself. I was a volcano baby, like so many women who have come before me, and it had been time. Life wasn't going to be easy. It wouldn't be easy, but I don't think I asked for easy. I think I asked for the truth.