

Chapter 3

Blood Stains

Before heading to Hawaii tomorrow, we refuel and pick up a swing mooring so *Hoop* can move freely, as the tidal range here averages twelve feet, and the current is strong. Even though the yacht club at the end of the long pier looks rundown, it's where the count wants us to eat and take an early night. But the girls have other plans.

Although Balboa is in the American-controlled zone, it's a suburb of Panama City, which ranks along with New York as one of the world's most dangerous places. Be that as it may, the girls bully their parents into letting them go out for the evening if Jerry and I take responsibility—a commitment I have doubts about.

'And don't wake us when you come back,' Arno adds, tickling Mickie, who's also indignant at not being allowed to go. 'We have a lot to do before setting off.'

We're soon ready for a night of fun. Jerry is wearing slacks and a European Cup Final T-shirt, while I am dressed in a linen suit to match the girls' skimpy dresses. We board the dinghy unnoticed by the 'rents' and head ashore, then make our way to Fourth of July Avenue, which marks the perimeter of the Canal Zone. Here, the contrast is stark between a well-ordered US

territory and a banana republic, where bored, edgy paramilitary soldiers patrol the streets.

‘In Panama City,’ the Zonian police officer says to Jerry as we wait to cross the road, ‘the only rule is there ain’t no rules.’ He tips the brim of his blue Stetson cavalry hat, and his hand eases down to rest on the butt of a stainless-steel Smith & Wesson Magnum revolver. ‘Y’all take care over there because I can’t come to rescue you.’

The cop has no sooner spoken than the girls, heedless of his advice, set off across the road.

‘Hey, no jaywalking,’ he shouts after them.

‘I thought there weren’t any rules,’ Johanna yells back.

Aware we’re up for a run-around, I set off in hot pursuit, leaving Jerry talking to the cop. He catches up with me along Harrison Avenue, where the girls are already attracting attention. A small gang of guys, all pimped up for the night, gawk and whistle while Johanna and Lucie preen themselves.

‘Where are you going to take us?’ Johanna asks Jerry, all sassy-like.

Without skipping a beat, he confidently guides us down a bustling street filled with a mix of battered American cars, bicycles, motor scooters, and colourful buses. The constant noise of horns honking and beeping echoes up and down the road as drivers deal with the one thing that matters—don’t hit anything in front.

Jerry turns right and jostles through a crowd onto Casco Viejo, where the smell of fried plantains and sweet coconut lingers on the warm night air. He heads us down a narrow street of elegant colonial buildings tucked inside the centuries-old city walls. Everywhere, we pass bars and brothels open to restless newcomers seeking another raucous night. Jerry stops us outside one cool-looking venue.

‘How did you find out about this place?’ I ask.

‘I asked the cop while you lot were jaywalking.’

‘And you took it all in?’

‘Soldiers listen to orders. Lives depend on it.’

Impatient, Johanna interrupts, ‘I want a drink.’

Inside, it’s a cauldron of energy with heads swinging in screw-faced joy to percussive Latin rhythms. The Panamanians are a good-looking, loose-hipped race, and they know it.

‘Now listen,’ Jerry says, coming over all parentals. ‘This place is full of modern-day marauders. Keep your traps shut about where you’ve been and where we’re going.’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah!’ Johanna’s tone is defiant as usual. ‘We weren’t born yesterday.’

I laugh at her. She gives me a withering look, her almond eyes blazing with indignation.

‘Oh Johanna, you’re so sweet when you’re angry.’

‘Sweet! Sweet!’ she shoots back, fizzing like a firework. ‘I’m

not bloody sweet. If you think I'm sweet, you can go hang. Come on, Lucie, let's find some real men.'

'Good riddance,' Jerry waves them away with his hand.

The girls slide onto the dance floor as one. Seeing how they effortlessly find willing dance partners is frustrating, making my rejection as a contender even more annoying. They shimmy across the dance floor, enjoying themselves, I feel jealous and left on the sidelines as a spectator.

Jerry snaps me back to reality. 'Forget them. Let's get drunk.'

We start the night with bottles of icy Balboa beer, a refreshing gnat-piss we turn into a chaser by drinking it with local rum. With sailors' abandon we're well on the way when a woman Jerry's been giving the eye comes over to flirt with him.

Given my experience in Puerto Rico, I reckon she's probably drugged-up *travesti*. 'She's a hooker,' I whisper. '*una mariposa*.'

'Well, get you. You and your boy scout badge for the bleeding obvious.' Jerry's all pumped up and eager to go. 'Why do you think I brought us here? I asked the cop for a blow bar.'

Leaning over, the woman points to a semi-private booth and holds up two fingers to show the price in dollars for services. Jerry nods in my direction and says, 'His barrel's bent, but I shoot straight.' With that cute remark, he hops off with his hot Latina.

Sitting with my drink. Uncomfortable in the heat, I keep my eye on the girls, who are now ensconced with a couple of guys at a table. Johanna is babbling away in full flow. Lucie ignores my

glance in the way a child hides behind their hands, thinking you can't see them. I want to be dancing with her, but sit inept, my feet tapping the floor in frustration. Jerry's trick doesn't take long. He comes back smiling.

'How was it?'

'She made five minutes feel like twenty. Gave me a bloody brilliant blow job. I shot my load. She swallowed, all for two bucks.' He knocks back a rum. 'Result?'

'She's a transvestite,' I tease him. 'Who's the homo now?'

'What?' Jerry splutters into his glass. 'A chick with a dick?' He laughs. 'Any port in a storm, mate. But not a word about it to anyone.' He finishes his drink. 'Get the girls. We're heading back.'

Jerry stumbles and bumps into someone as he makes for the door, which prompts an exchange of insults. Steering well clear, I head to the table where two lotharios are beguiling the girls with Latin charm.

'Sorry to break this up,' I say. 'but we've got to go back.'

'Don't be such a wet blanket.' Johanna gives me a contemptuous glare. 'You sound like a teacher.'

The two guys are indignant, making it clear with hand gestures.

'I'm serious! Jerry's fighting drunk. We've got to go.'

'We're having fun,' Lucie says. 'Can't we stay longer?'

'No! Out now!' My words carry the weight of an elder brother's authority. To my relief, Lucie rises from her seat, and even the reluctant Johanna follows suit. Sensing trouble on the

horizon, the two guys raise their arms in submission.

‘Goodbye, contessa,’ a pock-marked-faced guy says to Johanna. ‘You must invite me to visit your boat.’

She dismisses his advance with a wave. ‘We’re leaving at dawn.’

‘What else did you tell him?’

‘Nothing much; he loves boats and asked where we are moored.’

‘And you’re a countess,’ I say, emphasizing the title with air quotes.

‘Well, I am!’ Johanna retorts, her tone arch. ‘What’s the point in lying? It impresses people and they think we’re rich.’

‘Two for the price of one.’ A sozzled Lucie jokes.

‘Johanna, you’re right!’ I say, ushering them towards the door. ‘I was wrong! You’re not sweet. You’re stupid!’

The taxi’s bodywork is full of dings and dents. The old Pontiac seems like it’s survived fire and robbery, but it bounces along just fine. A furry football dangles where a rearview mirror should be, and the girls squeal as we jerk from side to side. The cabbie takes us on a white-knuckle ride. Sitting in the front, I face the full force of the driver’s love for Panama and loathing of America, feelings he makes clear with staccato hand gestures and emphatic honks of the horn.

‘Tell him to shut the fuck up,’ Jerry slurs, slumped in the back. He carries on about what a shithole the place is.

‘Oh, be a gentleman for once,’ I say, turning round to face him,

‘and not some lowlife, pissed-up squaddie.’

My remark brings an uncomfortable silence. The girls stare intently out their windows.

‘You’re going to regret saying that.’ Jerry man-spreads his legs. ‘Not today, not tomorrow, but one day you’ll wish you’d kept your trap shut.’ We drive on, uptight and uncomfortable in the heat, with Lucie’s hiccups punctuating the awkwardness.

Back at the yacht club pontoon, I we squeeze into the tender. It’s colder on the water. The girls begin to shiver. I row out to *Hoop* with a will. The moon is rising, so I don’t need her anchor light to guide me to the boarding ladder. Once on deck, Johanna slips off to bed without saying a word.

After taking a piss over the side, Jerry stumbles to his bunk, the worse for wear; I was wrong to have baited him and regret calling him a squaddie. It was a silly piece of public-school twattery so I could show off to the girls and pretend I was in their class. As if!

‘Thanks for getting us back, Plum Bum,’ Lucie says, hiccups over.

‘I suppose I’m stuck with that nickname.’

‘Yes,’ She pecks me on the cheek. ‘I think it’s sweet.’

Wriggling into the Coffin as I now call my quarters, it’s too hot for the sleeping bag, so lie on top in cutoffs and a T-shirt. Lucie comes to mind. I picture her sailing with her hair blowing in the wind and chuckle at her attempt at humor. I can’t deny a growing

fascination.

During the night, I am pulled out of a dream and thrown into the present. My curiosity is sparked as *Hoop* tilts slightly, only to correct herself. It isn't a sway caused by the wake of a passing boat, and with no tell-tale splash, it's not Jerry's drunken misstep overboard. Intrigued, I get up to investigate.

Stepping out of the companionway hatch, a man stands three feet away with a gun leveled at my head. An accomplice brandishes a machete, casting an ominous shadow over the unfolding nightmare.

'What the fuck do you want?' I shout, desperation lacing my voice, hoping it will alert the others.

'Shut up, or you die!' snaps the guy, focusing the revolver on my face. In a second, I recognize the pockmarked punk from the bar.

'You!'

'Yes, we meet again. Now, give us the money.'

'We don't have any money,' I stammer, my legs trembling.

'You gringos have dollars.' He spits the words in a hot gust of air.

'You have thousands of dollars on board.' His accomplice joins in. 'We'll kill you if we don't get the money—NOW!'

The aft cabin door opens, spilling light on the scene, and Jerry appears bleary-eyed. 'What the fuck?' he exclaims, taking it in. Sobering up fast, he slams the cabin door shut, shouting to the

girls, 'We're being robbed. Stay inside and lock the door.'

The man with the machete seizes him, forcefully pushing him into the cockpit with the side of the blade. 'Shut up and join your friend.'

'We don't have any money,' I repeat, my legs shaking as I lift an arm in defense.

'You gringos all have dollars.' His flying spittle rains on my face.

'It's the owner you want, not us,' Jerry interjects, his voice flat and matter of fact, as though he's detached from the gravity of the situation. 'He has lots of dollars.'

The pockmarked guy points the gun toward the forward companionway. 'You two get below. Don't try anything, or the countess gets cut!'

Pushed from behind, we pile into the saloon on top of each other. The guy lurks in the hatchway, signaling with his gun for us to move.

'What the hell is going on?' Arno shouts, appearing from his cabin, furious at being woken up.

'We're being robbed,' Jerry says, pointing out the gunman, half hidden in the dark. 'They want money.'

Arno lurches forward, but Jerry stops him with the flat of his hand. 'There are two of them. The other's up by the aft cabin with a machete.' Arno stares at him in disbelief. 'The girls are safe for now. They're locked in.'

‘These guys were chatting up the girls last night,’ I blurt out. ‘They think we have money on board.’

‘Always showing off,’ Arno mutters, his words laced with anger.

‘Hey, quit talking. Give me the cash.’

Arno slumps down on a settee. ‘There isn’t any.’

The guy laughs. He knows better. ‘Don’t lie to me. The contessa tells me how rich you are!’

‘I thought you were supposed to be looking after them,’ Arno growls at Jerry and me.

‘*Que Passa?*’ the machete man shouts down. ‘*Vamos!*’

‘Give me the money quick!’ his partner shouts at Arno in a breathy explosion of desperation. ‘*Mucha plata rápidamente!*’

The side stateroom door opens, and Mickie runs in.

‘Papa, what’s all the noise?’ She stops, then cries.’

‘Shut the fuck up!’ The guy waves his pistol at her.

Arno pulls Mickie close to him. ‘In that drawer, that’s all the cash there is,’ he says, his voice indignant, his eyes furious.

The gunman wrinkles his nose at me. ‘Get it, blondie.’ The tension tightens as the demand intensifies.

In zombie mode, I head to the chart table and pull out a fistful of dollar bills. Then something clicks. The guy’s pint-sized; I can grab the gun and overpower him. Adrenaline floods my veins. I turn around, fearless. But before I make any move, Jerry senses the sudden bravado. He snatches the cash with one hand and

punches me in the stomach with the other. The impact ripples through my body. Winded, I collapse to the floor. The gunman, agitated, points the pistol at everyone. Arno pulls Mickie's close. 'Come here, my *pumpernickel*. You're safe with Papa.'

Jerry offers the wad of cash. 'Here, take it. It's over three hundred.'

The gunman snatches the dollar bills. '*Coño*,' He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. '*Coño*.' Hundreds are not what he came for, not enough to make the risk worthwhile. He's after thousands.

¿Que pasó? his accomplice shouts. *¿Que pasó loco?*

The tension is palpable as the gunman hesitates. Jerry fills the void.

'This is nothing,' he says, looking at the money with disdain. His voice assumes a different tone as he whispers a betrayal. 'Like you said, more money must be hidden on the boat.'

'Get it now!' the gunman orders, his nervous eyes darting around.

'Take the cash.' Come a shout from above. '*Vámonos!* Let's go!'

I try to stand up, Jerry kicks my hand from under me. Unafraid he leans toward the gunman. 'I hate these people,' he whispers, as though sharing an intimacy. 'They pay me nothing.' He pauses. 'I've a plan for you to get rich.' The room is tense as Jerry hints at his hidden agenda. 'I'll help you steal the yacht. We'll find the money later. You take the dollars. I take the boat.' A flicker of a

smile crosses the gunman's lips. Jerry presses on. 'If we go now, no one will notice.' He adds as a bonus, 'And you have fun with the girls.'

'Son of a bitch,' I spit, still prone on the floor. Jerry kicks me hard.

The guy with the gun shouts up to his friend, and they exchange words in staccato Panamanian. 'It's a fast ship,' Jerry says, hustling them into a decision. 'We could use it to smuggle drugs.'

'OK, gringo,' the gunman says, his greed inflamed. 'Do anything crazy, and I'll kill you.' He then backs out of the companionway. Jerry follows him to the cockpit and closes the hatch, locking us below.

Struggling to my feet, I appeal to Arno. 'What are we to do?'

'Wait here! Jerry is a dead man.' He takes Mickie to Anna, still hidden behind the stateroom door.

The sound of the engines starting reverberates around the boat. Trapped in the saloon and overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness, I yell at Jerry in defiance. My words are ignored by the excited talk in the cockpit as someone goes forward to cut the mooring line.

Diesel fumes seep into the cabin as *Hoop* goes into reverse. With my heart beating fast, I grab the cook's knife from the galley. Then, without warning, the engines go full tilt ahead, and we

swerve this way and that. As we spin out of control, pans fly, and the girls scream riding a fairground ride from hell. The chaos intensifies, each moment adding to the frantic pace of the unfolding disaster.

Next, *Hoop* shudders as the gearbox slams into reverse. We stop short. I bang my head and drop the knife. The cabin fills with smoke. I cough. The hatch slides back.

‘Plum!’ Jerry shouts. ‘Come up here quick.’

Crawling out onto the deck, I spot Jerry, his arm outstretched with a gun pointed at one of the men clinging to the rigging.

‘Take over the helm.’

‘Where’s the other guy?’

‘Back there somewhere,’ Jerry says with a nod. ‘He needed a swim and left his gun behind. Didn’t want to get it wet, I guess.’

‘Fuck, man, what went down?’

‘Keep her steady,’ Jerry says. ‘But be ready to swerve. This guy’s still got his machete and may make a run at us.’

It’s then I notice blood on the wheel and realize I’m bleeding from the bash to my head. I can feel it running down my face and dripping off my chin. Gazing down the boat, I catch a fleeting shadow. Under the shroud lights, Arno emerges from the forehatch, speargun leveled at Jerry—and by consequence, me.

‘Drop the gun,’ he shouts, half hidden behind the mast. ‘This is my boat. I’ve had everything taken away from me once. It won’t happen again.’ His voice is full of meaning and menace.

‘Only when this punk drops his machete, skipper,’ Jerry shouts back, pointing the pistol at the hapless stooge.

Realizing two trained killers are facing each other down, I play referee. ‘It was all a charade,’ I shout out, as though I’ve witnessed a miracle. ‘Jerry played them for a pair of patsies.’

Taking advantage of the distraction, the pirate drops the blade on the deck, hurls himself over the side, and starts to swim away. Jerry follows the splashing with the barrel of the gun.

‘Don’t do it, mate,’ I plead. ‘It’s not worth it.’

‘Oh, it’s mate now, is it?’ he says, lowering the weapon. ‘I wouldn’t fire this piece of crap if you paid me.’

‘Why not?’

‘A Warsaw Pact 7.65mm automatic pistol, accurate to fifteen yards. Would the ammo be dependable in the tropics? Probably not. Click-bang, as we call it. You pull the trigger and peer down the barrel, wondering where the bullet has gone—not advisable.’

‘Would the other guy have used it?’

‘Doubt it. The punks were greedy, not killers. Their plan was half-baked. Pulling a trigger on someone is tricky if they’re not shooting.’

‘I don’t believe in guns,’ I reply, recalling when a gun exploded over my head as a warning on *Gay Gander*.

‘You don’t have to believe; simply point, squeeze, and watch in disbelief as you miss nine times out of ten.’

Jerry and I return *Hoop* to her mooring while Arno is on the two-way, making a distress call on Channel 16. He reports two men in the water and an attempted hijacking. While waiting for the Coast Guard to turn up, Jerry and I sit in the cockpit. He is distant and detached while I'm trying to calm down and work out what happened. Notwithstanding the sticky mat of hair and congealing blood on my head, I couldn't have bled as much as the splatter stains around the cockpit show. Seeing Lucie come out of the cabin brings me up short.

'Oh, Plum,' she says, looking at my wound, 'you're such a hero helping save us all.'

For a moment, bathed in her warmth, I feel I'm one. Jerry sneers, 'If he's the man of your dreams, luv, you'd better wake up.'

Moments later, a high-speed patrol boat is heading toward us, its searchlight sweeping the water. The vessel comes alongside, a pair of machine guns in its bow turret, ominous and deadly in the faint light of a waning moon.

An officer of the Southern Coast Guard jumps on deck with the confidence of a man who only needs probable cause to board a vessel.

We gather in the saloon, where I blurt out an account of events, avoiding mentioning having met the robbers earlier and the girls spilling the beans about the boat's location. Then Jerry tells his side of the story, saying the gunman lost his footing and

fell overboard as the boat sped out of control. While confirming the story but skirting over details, Arno adds that they forced Jerry into starting the engines as they were planning to hijack us.

‘You’re lucky to have an ex-soldier on board. This may have turned ugly. These guys were high on drugs and capable of anything.’

‘Jerry was calm under fire,’ Arno says.

‘Oh, yes,’ the officer says as if reminding himself. ‘You can keep the popgun as a souvenir. But I’d better take the ammunition.’

Jerry slips out the magazine and empties the bullets from the clip. The officer counts them and smiles. ‘I’ll have the one up the spout.’

‘Can’t blame a man for trying,’ Jerry says with a laugh, emptying the chamber. ‘This is a rare caliber.’

‘You won’t find a slug to fit that between here and Tucumcari.’

‘What happens now?’ Jerry asks.

‘The way it appears to me,’ the officer conjectures, thinking aloud, ‘if these punks make it back, rumors will spread, and they’ll concoct some bullshit about them being the victims.’

‘But they came out to rob us,’ Arno insists firmly.

‘Listen up, folks. It appears the thieves who targeted your boat were opportunists. Since your vessel is the largest in the harbour, they assumed it would be an easy mark and stole the canoe trailing off your stern from the beach. Unfortunately, this isn’t the first

time this has happened. In most cases, the victims pay up and move on.'

Arno's brow furrows. 'If you catch them, will we have to stay?'

The officer lifts his cap and scratches his buzz cut. 'Right now, At this moment, the Panamanian government is trying to pressure us into relinquishing control of the Canal. Tensions are running high. The last thing we need is an incident to spiral out of control.'

'We don't want to cause trouble,' Arno insists.

'A Soviet spy trawler just came through. The Ruskie's are smuggling in weapons to stir up trouble.'

His walkie-talkie crackles into life. 'Just found a dead body in the water. Must have bled out.'

My eyes flash on Jerry, who sits hollow-eyed.

'Do you want me to call that into HQ?'

The officer goes up on deck while we sit in silence below, with nobody looking at each other. Three minutes later, he pokes his head through the hatch. 'Here's the deal,' his eyes locking on each of us in turn. 'My orders are to escort you out of Panamanian waters as quickly as possible. This entire incident never happened. Clear?'

Jerry salutes, and the officer returns the gesture. 'Let this be a lesson to us all. We live in dangerous times. Have a safe journey.' Arno nods respectfully. I swear he clicks his heels.

First light sees us heading out under the escort of a US Navy PBR31 Mk II Patrol Boat. After an hour, the *Pibber* spins away in

a cloud of exhaust smoke, a whoop from its klaxon, and the Zonian slogan daubed on its transom: ‘We bought it, built it, it’s ours!’

By mid-morning, the shock of what’s happened sinks in, and in reaction, I feel sick. The family huddles below, singing a lullaby together in German. The melody of *Der Mond ist aufgegangen* filters up through the hatch. It is a traditional song about the moon, the sky, and the stars, and I guess it’s their way of making sense of what’s happened. Incongruous with the harmonies below, I’m kneeling and washing away the dried blood. The drips from my head on the cockpit sole are like splashes of red wine, but what I hadn’t noticed before is a pool of blood in the scuppers. It looks like it came from a stab wound, but that’s not a question I want to ask. The violence that spiraled out of control is best left unimagined.

‘I’ve seen an officer faint at the sight of blood,’ Jerry comments, watching me swab the deck.

‘Not a useful trait in a soldier,’ I try to make light of the situation.

‘Public school pillock! He was all la-di-da and no common sense.’

Refusing to take the bait, I toss the bucket over the rail, then drag it back up on its lanyard with enough water to sluice down the mess. With the evidence washed away, we might get back to

normal.

As we bid farewell to the Gulf of Panama, the engines thrumming beneath our feet, Jerry steers us into the Pacific, heading towards Isla Jicaron. I'm on the lookout so we don't get trapped in the kelp fields off the Azuero Peninsula, where the dull grey sands stretch ahead, as flat as we all feel.

Anna breaks the spell at noon coming on deck with a brew.

'Jerry, I want to say how grateful we are for what you did.' She hands him a mug of tea.

'Was doing my job, missus. It's what you took me on for,' he replies with modesty. 'Told you pirates are about.'

Hearing the exchange, Arno sticks his head out the hatch. 'You had me worried, Jerry. Wondering whose side you were on.'

'That was the point, skipper. They had no idea what they were doing, so they could have done anything. I had to lure them into a trap with you all out of the way.'

'You didn't have to be so rough. You gave me a right kicking.'

Jerry looks at me. 'I'm a professional. I don't do playacting.'

Chapter 4

Abrupt Halt

Hearing Lucie's barefoot tread pad along the deck towards me, I stop trying to scratch my itchy cut.

'Let me have a look at your wound.' Leaning forward, I feel her hands separating my matted hair. 'It needs washing with salty water. Were you hit by the gun or the machete?'

Looking at her feet between mine, It's time to fess up, as I've regretted the split-second when Lucie thought of me as a hero. The instant I took the credit for being in the action when I was only a bystander.

'It was a shelf.'

'A shelf! Did you say a shelf?'

'Yes. The awkward one by the companionway hatch. I knocked into it when the boat spun out of control.' My voice trails off as the fine golden hairs on her legs distract me.

'But I thought you...' Lucie says, but I interrupt her.

'I'm no hero; I don't want to take credit that I don't deserve.'

'Now you're being modest,' she says, putting her arm on my shoulder. 'It must have been terrible for you.'

Wanting her hand to stay there as long as possible, I let out a

little sigh. Lucie ruffles my hair in sympathy.

‘Ouch,’ I squeal as she touches the scab by mistake.

‘Sorry, Plum. I had no idea a shelf could be so painful.’

‘Now you’re making fun of me.’

‘Come back to the cockpit. I’ll clean it up.’ She leads me like a wounded soldier before raking Anna’s medicine chest for witch hazel.

‘Oh, get this!’ says Jerry, his eyes darting back at us from the helm. ‘Florence Nightingale and her poor patient. Makes me want to puke.’

I may be reading this wrong, but is he jealous because Lucie’s paying me attention? Better watch my back or be pushed overboard, leaving Jerry with the girls and the contraband he hasn’t paid me for.

Attitudes change when Johanna appears on deck wearing bug-eyed wraparound sunglasses, asking if anyone’s seen her book.

‘Which one?’ Jerry says, all helpful. ‘You’ve books everywhere.’

‘*Jonathan Livingston Seagull!* I was getting into it, and now I can’t find it anywhere. It’s driving me crazy.’

‘We’re free to go where we wish,’ I quote. ‘And to be what we are.’

‘Have you taken it? It’s mine. Give it back!’ Johanna says, accusing me as though I’ve stolen it.

‘No! I’ve read it. It’s a boho bible.’

‘What other goody-goody bullshit does your bird book say?’ jibes Jerry, feeling left out.

‘Here’s a test that tells you when your mission on earth is over,’ I say with a flourish.

‘Oh, yeah, what’s that?’

‘If you’re alive, it ain’t.’

Jerry is at a loss for words, questioning whether what I said is stupid or smart, as Johanna departs to continue her journey.

‘She fancies you,’ I whisper, hoping to wind him up.

His eyes widen with excitement. ‘Really? You think so.’ There’s a hint of hope in his voice, as though he’s won the lottery.

‘You’re dangerous. Women dig the scent of a bad boy.’

He’s giddy at the prospect of where it might lead. ‘She’s asked me to teach her fishing.’

‘There you go. Done deal. You’re in.’

‘Well, she’s a good catch.’

Sensing he’s taken the bait; I play with his head. ‘Men reckon they’re the kings of the fishing hole, but once a chick’s got you on the line, there ain’t no wiggling off.’

‘Says that in one of your books, does it?’

‘No, mate. Spun it out of thin air.’

‘But you’re no angler.’

‘No, but I know Johanna’s after getting her hook into big fish, so she’s probably practicing on you.’

‘Ouch, low blow,’ he says with a wry grin, trying to play it off

as if it hasn't bothered him. But I reckon I've struck a nerve.

'Break it up, you two.' Lucie appears, having forgotten about my cut. 'I've got Papa's orders to put up sails and turn the engines off.'

Her words, a rhapsody to me. We soon have *Hoop* under full sail, and with a favourable current hurrying us along, we make nine knots. By now, two days since setting out, we are off Jicaron Island, and if this fair wind holds, the day after tomorrow we should be hundreds of miles out into the ocean, heading northwest toward Hawaii.

Ocean voyages develop a rhythm. Our sea legs return by day three, and everyone's locked into the watch cycle. With *Hoop* galloping akin to a wild stallion, Lucie lets her guard down.

'One thing I love about sailing is the wave patterns. I'm calm inside when I feel the sea undulating like breathing.'

'That's how I feel.' I say, making a connection between us. 'I love all that momentum. When a wave has travelled hundreds of miles unimpeded and hits you, cause you're in the way but it doesn't care.'

'What I don't understand,' Lucie says, letting the mainsail out a tad, 'is wind. I mean, water's easy to come to grips with...'

'Just as long as it's in a mug,' I but in.

'Or, in your case, spilling it,' she quips quickly.

'You can spill wind too,' I counter, playing with the idea.

‘Seriously, I can’t understand how it works.’

‘It’s because you’re an airhead.’

‘It is what most men think, but I had hoped for more from you,’ she says, catching me off guard. ‘I thought you knew about the weather; can’t you explain it?’

I lick a finger and point it in the air. ‘It’s coming from that direction, but I have no idea what it is and why it’s coming.’

Lucie tightens up the mainsheet, and we pick up speed. ‘Then it’s good that I know what to do with it when it arrives.’

Hoop responds with thoroughbred class. We’re galloping along today. We may be in Hawaii sooner than expected.

The trouble with anticipation is when the payoff doesn’t come, and our balloon bursts. We’ve sailed 700 miles since leaving the Canal five days ago, but *Hoop*’s now dead in the water. The invisible force we rely on has vanished. Instead of a dynamic seascape, the ocean feels black and sticky. It’s as if we’re riding on the back of a giant sea slug galumphing nowhere.

Lucie is furious. ‘The wind can’t run out now,’ she says, tightening the mainsheet in a forlorn attempt to beat the odds. ‘We’ve just got started.’ But it’s a lost cause. With *Hoop* drifting, a sense of *déjà vu* of being becalmed in the Atlantic washes over me. The calm is unnerving when there’s no end in sight. I drop the headsail to stop it flapping. We all gather for an update.

Mickie has been reading the *Pilot Book* and, similar to her

father, likes giving lectures, so she tells us that at ten degrees north latitude, we're in the Doldrums, a zone that separates the trade wind belts of the South and North Pacific.

'In the olden days,' she says with relish. 'This is where they chucked animals over the side if you started running out of water.

'If we run short.' Jerry looks at me. 'I can find a volunteer.'

'Well, you'll have to catch me first,' I make a break for it down the deck. Mickie and Lucie chase after me in hot pursuit. Doubling back when Mickie heads me off at the mainmast shrouds, I bump into Lucie, and we tumble down into the fold of the sail on the foredeck.

'Oh, Plum, you're such fun. I wish I had a brother.' For a moment, we lie under the sun's intense heat, its warmth drawing our sweat away like blotting paper soaks up ink. Laughing as though we're kissing cousins caught frolicking in a haystack, we are called back to the cockpit. The change in conditions means a change of plan. Arno worries about the long journey to Hawaii and the risk of running out of diesel while we wait for the wind.

'Therefore,' he says with a finality-precluding argument, 'we are going to abandon this passage and motor north to Mexico.'

The news is a bitter disappointment as we're geared up for a long, lazy cruise. By contrast, we'll be hugging the coast all the way home.

'Will we stop anywhere?' I ask, hoping we're not going to bypass Central America.

‘No!’ Arno says firmly. ‘Before Panama, *Hoop* has been an object of interest to people, but now I feel she’s a target. The plan now is to return to civilization as fast as possible.’

‘Bloody pirates,’ Jerry pipes in, ‘they ruin it for everyone.’

While the decision is about getting his precious cargo home, Arno reads the disappointment on my face.

‘Sorry, Plum, but I can’t take another risk with my family’s safety. We will follow advice from the *Pilot Book* and sail one foot on the shore. You’ll be invaluable on this part of the trip!’

Despite buttering me up, my interests are at the bottom of Arno’s list of priorities. I can’t blame him, though—our relative affluence may well provoke another incident. Anyway, I mustn’t grumble, and I’ve nothing else to do except get to know Lucie better.

Hoop slices through the water, her engines humming and spewing fumes into the air. The mizzen sail flaps in the breeze as we change course. Yesterday, we sailed northwest, but *Hoop* now motors northeast towards Guatemala.

It feels like we’re playing *High Seas Gamble*, my nautical game of spinning the bottle, never knowing where our destination will be. The weather, always fickle, dictates our course. We have no choice but to obey its whims.

Sailing, with all its romance and adventure, also brings harsh realities. It involves the smell of engines, frequent direction

changes, and a loss of control as *Hoop* plows on regardless. I must embrace the unpredictable nature of the journey, if not the vagaries of the crew.

‘Let’s have a word,’ Jerry suggests as we put on the cover to shield the mainsail from the sun. ‘This change of plan suits us better. It means we’ll be able to flog the gear in the States rather than Canada.’

‘Damn sight riskier at customs.’

‘You told me to trust your stash. Don’t say you don’t believe it!’

Ignoring him, I keep my anxiety about the proposition to myself. I’m becoming conflicted about the repercussions our plans might inflict on the lives of people I’m starting to care about.

Today, a contagion of cabin fever is spreading like a rash. With life confined by the port and starboard rails and the boat’s length in between them, the last twenty-four hours have exemplified Jerry’s description of army life as moments of sheer terror punctuated by hours of boredom. We’re in the latter, in offshore quarantine where we eat, poop and sleep while life goes on outside the salty cordon that pens us in. We live in a floating tin bath of overflowing libidos, all tucked up cheek by jowl.

How Arno and Anna thought they could sail the girls around the world with a male crew on board without creating sexual

tension is a mystery. It's possible that the girls are less trouble on *Hoop* than they are at home, but right now Jerry's balls are bursting.

'Keep a lookout, mate. I'm off for a five-finger shuffle.' He clutches a fistful of bog paper heading to his retreat at the stern. 'If anyone asks, I'm playing with my fishing pole. No peeking, you perv.'

'It's getting tedious, Jerry. You sound like a cracked record.'

Until now, I've sublimated sex thoughts. It's a relief as urges are usually the fairground ride to my everyday desires. I've been trying to avoid drifting into a sexual fantasy by reciting poems and snippets of songs in my head when I'm in the Coffin. Even so, whenever one of the girls passes by my bunk, their potent pheromones trigger impulses that challenge my ability to resist temptation. It makes the gay image ridiculous. But how do I break the cover story everyone has bought into? When I first came on board, I didn't fit the girls' idea of manhood. I could tell by how they responded when Arno signed me up as crew. They're used to North American jocks or athletic Germans, which I'm not. I can hardly bounce in at breakfast saying I'm straight and 'Anyone fancy a shag?'

To keep us occupied during this listless time, Anna, acting as chief stewardess, has us busy doing chores. I haven't had time to digest breakfast before I find myself assigned to scrubbing the

deck and rubbing the rust off the stanchions. Lucie and Mickie make baggywrinkle—an anti-chafing gear for use on the rigging. They cut an old rope into six-inch bits and separate the strands, which they loop into twin lengths of whipping twine, creating fluffy pads to wrap around the shrouds where the sails rub.

‘Women’s work,’ Jerry jeers, ignorant that men invented the stuff.

‘And pointless,’ Johanna pipes in. ‘We’ve got enough for a fleet.’

Night falls, the cabin fever subsides, and we are freed from the all-encompassing horizon by a shroud of velvet.

This morning, a light breeze from the south blows us out of our blues, so I ready the foresail. In the cockpit, a battle of wills unfolds between Lucie and her father. In his mood of pragmatic impatience, Arno is all for cruising along with Dick and Harry doing the work. On the other hand, Lucie is romantic and doesn’t want to waste the wind. They’re caught in the motorsailer’s dilemma, and both are stubborn. But Arno’s not without heart. He turns off the engines when the wind stiffens so Lucie can put up the sails.

In awe of her ability, I help by using a pole to help the genoa catch as much wind as possible and further the cause of keeping the engines quiet. She soon has *Hoop* vibrating with efficient tension and humming harmoniously with the elements. To top it

off, Lucie sets the mizzen as a self-steering gear. By connecting two lines to the emergency tiller and using the sail as a wind vane, she stays within three degrees of our course.

‘It’s a real pleasure to sail with you,’ I say as we lounge in the sunshine, watching *Hoop* plow her furrow unaided. She grins at me with childlike pleasure. Leaning back on my elbows, I bask in her smile regardless of a sweaty arse crack from all the hard work of a relentless day’s sailing.

With the coast of Guatemala now low on the horizon, we gather in the cockpit for a picnic of bread, cheese, and curried eggs. Morale is high as we leave behind the threat of pirates and the disappointment of not getting to Hawaii. Night falls: Arno steers his ship, Anna scrapes scraps into the sea, Johanna flirts with Jerry, and Mickie plays cat’s cradle with Lucie.

Watching the peaceful scene, a sense of detachment begins to overcome me. Suddenly, confusion sets in, and I lose my grip on reality. My speech becomes slurred as I desperately call for help, and everything fades to black.

When I come to, familiar voices are whispering. I’m aware of Lucie holding my head to feed me sips of water. ‘What happened?’

‘You fainted,’ she says. ‘First, your knees went, and then you sank to the deck resembling a deflated balloon.’

‘You’ve got sunstroke,’ Anna says. ‘You’re to lie down and

rest.’

The mist of confusion begins to clear. ‘But it’s my watch soon.’ I protest like a puritan. ‘With Johanna.’

‘Don’t worry, sunshine. I’ll cover for you,’ Jerry says generously.

My confusion passes and everything falls into place: the boat, the trip, these crazy people. Despite nausea, it’s all right till I stand up and feel dizzy. Lucie helps me to the Coffin.

After struggling in, I lie cold and clammy in delirium, tossing, turning and winding the sheet around me till I’m so exhausted sleep wrestles me to oblivion. My dreams are horrific nightmares of sailing through a sea of blood with men searching for hidden treasure. Danger lurks around every corner, and there’s nowhere to run.

Startled awake, I realize it’s day and lie listening to the sound of *Hoop* sail on, oblivious to my nighttime terrors. Still a little shaky, I clamber out of the Coffin.

‘Gawd, blimey, you remind me of a wrinkled prune,’ says Jerry, sitting in the cockpit messing with a fishing line. ‘If that were beauty sleep, I’d ask for your money back.’

‘Where are we?’ I ask, squinting in the harsh light.

Arno, points ahead. Through the haze of my headache, I can make out a featureless yet fertile coastal plain. ‘Guatemala?’

‘Mexico! You’ve been out for thirty-six hours.’

Feeling better and on light duty, I watch Jerry teaching

Johanna to fish. Up to now, the ratio of fish on the table to fish in the sea is zero, but when she hooks a tiddler, she yells as though it's a whopper. Jerry helps her haul it in, and their arms quickly entwine.

Using his trusty knife, he cuts up the small fry as bait for a bigger fish hopefully, delicious mahi. He's confident these ray-finned predators are about as woody debris tangled up with floating rafts of kelp supply noonday shade for their prey.

'Mahi knows that and comes hunting,' He casts the line off the stern and lets it trail behind us.

Now wary of the sun, I go below to escape and find Arno at the chart table reading about an epic encounter he thought he'd never face. Unlike the *Kraken* or the *Flying Dutchman*, there's no denying the legend of Tehuantepec—it's got a whole gulf named after it. Lucie's understanding of wind will be tested to the limit.

Our conversation about the risks involved is drawn short by the sound of Johanna shrieking as the fishing line zips off the reel like a swarm of bees. The first mate's patience has paid off. We rush to look what's on the hook.

Jerry's stance at the back of the boat is heroic. From how he says it took the bait, jumping straight up out of the water when hooked and diving deep, he knows it's a large mahi and skillfully reels it in, tightening the line as the fish fights against him. Yet his catch turns sideways and dives when it sees the boat, forcing Jerry to play out and start over. The sheer force on the line makes the

rod bend to its limit, and Johanna has to clutch onto his waist to prevent him going overboard. After a hard-fought thirty minutes, the mahi begins to tire, and Jerry shouts for the gaff.

‘When I bring it alongside, hit it behind the dorsal fin and yank it up and in,’ he orders. ‘And don’t panic.’

‘Plum, you have been unwell. I shall do the honors.’ Arno steps forward and shouts, ‘Anna, fetch the camera!’

Removing a cork protector from the gaff’s sharp tip, I hand it to the skipper. Arno, more focused on the photo than a clean strike, stabs at the fish in vain. Realizing it’s a more challenging job than it appears. In danger of losing our lunch, he calls for help.

‘Plum! Take over.’

Jerry maneuvers the floundering fish back to the boat. In one fluid, sweeping motion, I plant the gaff in the fish and swing it upwards and out of the water.

‘Well done, Plum,’ Lucie cheers.

‘What about Jerry?’ Johanna reward is a peck on his cheek.

Over four feet long and male by the shape of its tall blunt head, the mahi must weigh about thirty pounds—a fine catch. Arno and Jerry hold the struggling fish and Anna snaps the moment.

‘Observe!’ Jerry says, hunkering down. ‘You’ll never forget this.’ He jabs the spearpoint of his dagger into the fish’s brain, making a quiet crunch-pop. ‘You can watch life drain away.’

We all huddle as the dazzling gold, green and iridescent blue

fish fades to grey and watch in silence as a creature of beauty and strength morphs from a living organism to dead meat. Anna soon shakes us out of our sentimentality by rattling pots and pans.

After eviscerating its belly and letting Mickie chuck the guts into the sea, Jerry shows Johanna how to butcher the carcass. He guides her hand with his knife to cut behind the gill plate towards the head, then follows the backbone to the tail before cutting back deeper. There's a slight ratcheting sound as the blade knicks against the vertebrae in the spine. Johanna then picks up a fillet and lays it skin-side down on a cutting board. Lucie can't believe Johanna is getting her hands dirty. Arno jokes about domesticity not becoming her, though the smile falls off his face when Lucie whispers it might be a sign, she's getting broody.

Mickie dangles the long backbone over the side, and a gull snatches it from her hand. Jerry slides the commando blade back into its leather sheath, and Johanna proudly delivers the fish to Anna. The catch proves cathartic. We all agree it's a change of fortune.

The salty scent emanating from the galley makes my mouth water. Before long, we're eating slices of raw fish marinated in lemon juice, followed by grilled mahi. A subtle flavor. As fresh as fish could be.

After we finish, Jerry is given a round of applause for his catch. A doe-eyed Johanna has hooked a hero.

‘You can hang your rod up for today,’ Anna says. ‘We have enough left for tomorrow. I will make sauerkraut and fish for supper. My new batch is ready. It was a wartime treat.’

My heart sinks. I’m an imaginative eater, but my imagination doesn’t stretch that far. However, Arno’s promise of two bottles of Riesling from the engine room bilge makes it sound palatable.

‘I’ll get ‘em for you, skipper,’ Jerry says, giving me a sideways look. ‘No need for you to dirty your hands.’

It’s then I remember the mangos I foraged from the golf course. They’ve been ripening on my shelf in the Coffin and have turned from green to yellow but now have a soft, mushy feel and dark spots on the skin. I slit one open, exposing juicy pale orange flesh, which oozes an alcoholic odor. While Arno looks dubious, Mickie licks her lips in anticipation. But as soon as I take the first bite, there’s a terrible tingling in my mouth as though I’ve eaten stinging nettles or poison ivy. Rushing to the sink, I spit out fibers and gulp in fresh water.

‘Tee hee ha ha!’ Mickie snickers at my swelling lips. ‘You look like a baboon’s butt!’

Anna’s quickly out of her seat and bound for the medicine chest, returning with a bottle of calamine lotion. ‘You’d better apply this, Plum,’ she says with a flicker of a smile.

Avoiding everyone out of embarrassment, I spend the rest of the day feeling sorry for myself. Nevertheless, by nightfall, the swelling’s gone. I jettison the remaining mangos overboard. *Good*

riddance to bad rubbish! I think watching them disappear in our wake.

‘Told you golf’s a waste of time’ Jerry slaps my back in a gesture of camaraderie as he passes.

The first mate’s a riddle to me. I just don’t understand him! He blows hot and cold. Clearly, he’s not to be trusted.

Chapter 5

Danger Zone

Closing in on the coast during the afternoon, we hear thunder rumbling in the saw-toothed mountains five miles away. At night, when I join Lucie on the dog watch, it's fireworks.

'You can see why, in past times, people thought the gods were angry,' A sudden burst of intense light casts an ethereal glow over us.

'It's still the same in Austria, called *Donner und Blitz*.'

'*Truenos y relámpagos*,' I counter in Spanish.

'*Donder en bliksem*,' she parries in Dutch.

We ran out of steam with *Tonnerre et foudre*. But then, as I catch her silhouette against the flickering white light, the mountain gods strike me with a *colpo di fulmine* as thunderbolt cracks open my heart.

'What will you do when we arrive in Canada?' she asks, unaware I've fallen for her in a way no rational argument can explain. Struggling to find the right words, I shrug my shoulders.

'You've a month to think about it.' Getting up she goes to wake up Arno for his watch. 'It's best to have some sort of a plan.'

Left alone, my mind wanders. Seeing the rugged peaks of the

Sierra Madre lit by lightning, I remember Humphrey Bogart and his partner searching for treasure. After we sell our weed, Jerry and I will be as lucky as them, painting the town red and ‘lighting cigars with \$100 bills’ while Johanna and Lucie sit on our laps dripping in diamonds. Wrapped in the warm glow of fantasy, I enjoy the last of the watch until an offshore wind delivers a dose of reality in the smell of burning, not the whiff of a good cigar, but an ardour-killing odour—smouldering garbage. What the *Pilot Book* describes as the signature scent of Central America.

Arno comes on deck. ‘Take some rest. A challenge lies ahead.’

‘Will you come and look at these?’ Mickie yells after breakfast. I lean over and spot loggerhead turtles, three feet long, drifting with the current. Their curious, arched expressions appear to inquire about our intentions, a notion Mickie is only too willing to explain. In spite of a light breeze, we don’t seem to be making any progress. We are sailing just to stay still.

Annoyed by our lack of forward motion, Arno orders me to drop the sails while he warms up the engines. Meanwhile, we’ve caught the attention of two frigate birds. They are trying to perch on the spreaders, but the swaying mast makes it impossible for their webbed feet to grip. Despite their impressive seven-foot wingspan and extended tail feathers, the birds’ efforts are more irritating than distracting. Lucky for Mickie, she isn’t in the rigging—given the size of the beaks, they could carry her away.

Tradition is they represent good luck, though their kludged attempt at landing fuels my uncertainty about what lies ahead.

The constant hum of the engines reverberates through the air as we inch closer to the Gulf of Tehuantepec—a sprawling crescent bay nestled along the southeastern fringes of Mexico.

The reputation of this place precedes us. It's not merely a gulf; it's a notorious nemesis, a daunting place etched in maritime folklore. Generations of sailors have dreaded crossing these waters, haunted by the memory of relentless squalls. Tehuantepecers, those formidable mountain-gap winds, carve a path through the Chivela Pass, sweeping across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec before hurling themselves into the Pacific Ocean.

These ferocious winds, called 'T-Peckers,' can push us off course or tear away our mast with unbridled ferocity. At this moment, Arno stands at the helm, a captain confronted with a critical decision. The gulf sprawls before us as he weighs the options: the safer, more extended trip hugging the inner edge or the bolder, riskier path straight across its heart. A choice that decides whether our voyage spans two days offshore or extends to a four-day trip, tracing the coastal contours.

The best weather forecast we can find is tuning into the local fishermen's chatter on the radio; they talk of a gentle breeze wafting from the south.

Eager and spirited, Lucie exclaims, 'Let's go sailing then!'

Backing her up, I point to a dozen fluffy cotton ball clouds. ‘We’ve nothing to worry about.’

Bamboozled, orders us to reef the mainsail and mizzen, keeping the engines running. With a two-knot current in our favour, *Hoop* should make eleven knots, allowing us to cross the gulf and be out of danger in forty-eight hours.

‘We can take on any demon squall,’ Lucie says excitedly. ‘Plum, hoist the Yankee jib. *Hoop*’s going in.’

By the following morning, we’re sixty miles into the gulf and fully committed. In the afternoon, the wind picks up and gusts up to twenty knots, creating white foam crests on the waves that whip spray across the deck. Although uncomfortable for those below, these conditions are perfect for a heavy boat. It’s a thrilling sail, as you rarely have a stiff breeze blowing on your beam with a flat sea.

Making steady progress overnight, we reach the exposed section directly in the path of any gusts that might be funneling through the mountain pass. All is calm as we sail through midday with a stiff breeze, sunshine, and the water—sapphire blue.

‘Did we outwit the Big Bad Wolf, Papa?’ Lucie asks.

Arno taps the cabin roof, laughing as he says, ‘Our house is made of steel, he can huff and puff, but he’s not coming in.’

Due to the sheer joy of handling *Hoop*, we take turns at the helm while staying in the cockpit looking for bad weather. By mid-afternoon, a thin line of cumulus clouds appears to be

heading towards us, often a sign of approaching weather—a forerunner of what’s to follow.

Approaching the cusp of the danger zone, the wind strength reaches gale-force. *Hoop* rips through the water as if fleeing a menace. Up ahead, a strange cloud formation appears that we try to dodge by heading inshore, but it disappears as if teasing us. Green blips appear and vanish like phantoms on the radar as Arno struggles to track the squalls building up around us. To avoid one, we head out to sea, but it grows more threatening, and then one we’ve avoided already re-forms to box us in. Too late to shorten sail, the huffing, puffing wolf catches us, and within seconds, a torrential downpour plunges us into a Biblical gloom. Taken by surprise and lashed by rain that strikes with the force of hail, I fight to keep control as a surge of water, propelled from the deep, catches *Hoop’s* bow and shoves us sideways.

With the compass needle swinging wildly, we are at the mercy of the elements, tossed between heaven and hell. An eerie sound whistles through the rigging, as if spectral forces are trying to steal *Hoop’s* very soul.

Then, almost as though bored, the gale-force wind leaves us stranded in a messy sea, facing miserable sailing ahead.

‘Let’s hope these Aztec gods have no more tricks up their sleeve,’ Arno says, hastily crossing himself. ‘I want to be back in a civilization I understand.’

‘What the hell happened?’ Jerry says, coming on deck. ‘I was

having a shit when the bog turned into a spin dryer.’

‘A local anomaly,’ I reply, regaining my composure. ‘Montezuma had a last roll of the dice and lost.’

Unlike me, wondering how close we came to foundering, Arno doesn’t play the ‘What if?’ game. With him, it’s ‘What is!’ He sets off to inspect for damage. With none found, he praises his German-made house of steel, then has me drop the sails while Jerry starts the engines. Arno worries that our imaginary wolf might hunt in packs.

After an anemic sunset buried behind a murky shroud of clouds, we forge ahead into darkness our path picked out by a constellation of fishing vessels shimmering in the distance. Finally, the half-closed eyelid of a slowly blinking moon guides us to safety.

Overnight, the wind drops and the sea goes flat. Having made it through, we motor to the fishing village of Puerto Ángel on the southern tip of the Oaxaca coast. As midday approaches, we motor into a sheltered curve of golden sand with fishing canoes pulled well back from the emerald water—a perfect spot to unwind. We slowly putter in, watched by a hunched-shouldered heron perched in quiet reflection on a rotting timber, and moor alongside a dilapidated pier built during more prosperous days. When the engines stop, the gentle kiss of a slow rolling tide mixes with distant dog barks and a braying mule. Everyone sighs with

relief.

After discovering that the fuel dock is non-operational, the squat latrines are basic, and the shower is al fresco, Arno and Anna go off to find an official and record our arrival. There's a blizzard of paperwork to be stamped—according to rules no one understands—but it's the only way to obtain a tourist card and avoid arrest.

Now down from the crow's nest, where she's been looking for hidden rocks, Mickie grabs Lucie, and free from nautical confinement, they hop, skip and jump to the beach. After they've gone, Jerry clarifies that he wants some alone time with Johanna and tells me to step out for a while.

Down the quay, wearing a hat of plaited palm fronds with a brown woven blanket thrown over his shoulder, a local fisherman is landing a catch of red snapper. He's in an old log canoe hollowed out from a tree, with tumblehome sides to help haul in nets. A collection of heavy paddles is stowed on board, proof of the strength of the wiry man who owns the vessel.

'How long does it take to catch the fish?' I ask, affecting a cowboy film gringo accent.

His voice is subdued, unlike mine. 'As long as it takes.'

I persist pretending I'm a rookie journalist from *National Geographic*. 'What else do you do here?'

A glimmer of mirth dances within his eyes. 'I sleep, eat, drink, play guitar and screw my wife.' He pauses momentarily as I

ponder his perfect life. ‘What do you do, blondie?’

The question makes me feel awkward. ‘I’m a boat bum.’ I mumble, looking at my feet.

‘It’s an easy life for you then,’ he says with disdain. ‘My life is hard. Buy some fish and make me happy too.’

Trying to escape my self-made trap, I spot Arno and shout that fish are for sale. ‘He has dollars, amigo. Sell him the best.’

‘Blondie, then they will have to buy them all!’ The fisherman crosses himself. ‘To those who love Jesu Cristo, the sea gives up her riches, and the Yankees pay cash.’

Smarting from the encounter, I leave the shade of the palm trees and walk into the village.

A crumbling colonial church towers over shanty shacks on the main street surrounded by palisade fences. Behind them, agave plants protect cabbage and potato plots. Nearby, a dog lounges in the shade and chickens scratch about in the courtyard of a cantina. From its chimney, milky wisps of woodsmoke waft away on a breeze. A steel-grilled store is closed for the afternoon and, like an insect in amber, a hobbled, forlorn donkey is rooted to the spot.

Following a path leading out of the village and up a densely wooded hillside beyond, I disturb a host of fritillary butterflies; their bright orange wings brush my face. One lands on my arm to drink the salt sweat. This lush forest is hot and humid—the air is

liquid.

Against a deep, verdant background, the tropical colours are intoxicating - a rich contrast with the sea's limited palette. From high in the trees, exotic birdcalls add to the heady mix.

The laughter filters through the leaves from way down the path. I creep up and look out on every cowboy's fantasy: three women are washing laundry on a riverbank a short distance away. They work with skirts tucked up and arms bare, the dappled sunlight glinting off water droplets as they throw down cotton sheets on a worn-smooth rock. With tightly drawn-back hair and splashed wet clothes, the image ignites a desire I have been trying to suppress. I barely touch myself before my seed spurts onto the rich soil. My relief is short-lived by the sight of a young boy who has been watching me. Startled he takes off to the river while I run to the sea.

Back at the boat, Arno confronts me with a bucket of fish. 'Jerry says he only cleans what he catches, so you'll have to deal with these and make supper.'

Taking the pail, I wave away flies. 'Thanks for nothing.'

Arno steps ashore. 'The fish were your idea in the first place.'

Never one to turn down a challenge, I put *Hoop's* barbeque on the quay and fire up the charcoal. Then it's down to gutting and removing any scales and fins. It's a messy job, and I'm up to my elbows when Jerry and Johanna appear from the aft cabin looking

as though. they've been fooling around.

'Quite the domestic goddess, isn't he?' Jerry quips.

'Looks good in a pinny,' Johanna replies, pulling down her sunglasses for a better view. 'How long to supper? I'm starving.'

'I'm not surprised, cooped up like that. But you've come too early.'

'We've got time for a beer then,' Jerry says, slapping Johanna's bum to mark his territory. She lets it pass but is not amused.

When the gang heads back from the bar, roasted red snapper in a green herb sauce served with rice is on the menu. Ignoring the moans about bones, the fish disappear. By the time I turn out the charcoal embers to fizzle to death in the sea, bellies are full.

Mickie's the first to spot an enterprising guy coming down the pier, pushing a trolley. Sensing an opportunity, he's here to sell us raspado, a delicious treat. Under the light of a hurricane lamp, he scrapes a large block of ice with a cheese grater, fills a paper cup, and flavors the shavings with tamarind syrup. On such a warm night, the cold, sweet, sticky raspado is the perfect dessert, and we lap them up slurp-by-slurp as the vendor leaves a few bucks richer.

Forever, the taskmaster, Arno, announces that we will be leaving shortly on the two-day voyage to Acapulco and sailing overnight as it's cooler. An abrupt end to a brief respite, but I'm spared the embarrassment of bumping into the boy again.



