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*I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I heard that my father had died, I thought to myself as I stared out of the window and saw the complete blackness of night. Intermittently below me, there were small clusters of twinkling lights indicating human habitation, each light containing a life, a family, a set of friends . . .*

None of which I felt I had any longer.

It was almost like seeing the world upside down, because the lights below the plane resembled less brilliant facsimiles of the stars above me. This reminded me of the fact that one of my tutors at art college had once told me that I painted as if I couldn't see what was in front of me. He was right. I couldn't. The pictures appeared in my *mind*, not in reality. Often, they didn't take animal, mineral or even human form, but the images were strong, and I always felt compelled to follow them through.

Like that great pile of junk I'd collected from scrapyards around London and housed in my studio at the apartment. I had spent weeks trying to work out exactly how all the pieces should be placed together. It was like working on a giant Rubik's Cube, though the raw ingredients comprised of a

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smelly oil can, an old Guy Fawkes scarecrow, a tyre and a rusting metal pickaxe. I'd constantly moved the bits into place, happy right up until I added that last vital piece, which always – wherever I put it – seemed to ruin the entire installation.

I laid my hot brow against the cool Perspex of the window, which was all that separated me and everyone else on the plane from asphyxiation and certain death.

*We are so vulnerable . . .*

No, CeCe, I cautioned myself harshly as panic rose inside me, *you can do this without her, you really can.*

I forced my thoughts back to Pa Salt, because given my ingrained fear of flying, thinking about the moment I heard he'd died was – in a weird way – comforting. If the worst happened and the plane dropped from the sky, killing us all, at least he might be there on the other side, waiting for me. He'd already made the journey up there, after all. And he'd made it alone, as we all did.

I'd been pulling on my jeans when the call had come from my younger sister Tiggy, telling me that Pa Salt was dead. Looking back now, I was pretty sure that none of what she said really sank in. All I could think of was how I'd tell Star, who had adored our father. I knew she would be totally devastated.

*You adored him too, CeCe . . .*

And I had. Since my role in life was to protect my more vulnerable sister – she was actually three months older than me but she'd found it difficult to speak so I'd always spoken for her – I'd sealed up my heart, zipped up my jeans, then walked into the sitting room to tell her.

She'd said nothing, just wept in my arms. I'd done every-

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thing I could to keep my own tears at bay. For her, for Star. I'd had to be strong because she'd needed me . . .

*That was then . . .*

'Madam, is there something you need?'

A cloud of musky perfume descended from above me. I looked up and saw the stewardess leaning over me.

'Er, no thanks.'

'You pressed the call bell,' she said in an exaggerated whisper, indicating the rest of the passengers, who were all asleep. After all, it was four in the morning, London time.

'Sorry,' I whispered back, as I removed my offending elbow from the button that had alerted her. Typical. She gave me the kind of nod I remembered one of my teachers had given me when she'd seen me opening my eyes during morning prayer at school. Then, with a rustle of silk, the stewardess disappeared back to her lair. I did my best to make myself comfortable and close my eyes, wanting to be like the four hundred or so random souls who had managed to escape from the horror of hurtling through the air in an aluminium tube by going to sleep. As usual, I felt left out, not part of the crowd.

Of course, I could have booked into business class. I still had some money left from my legacy – but not enough that I wanted to waste it on just another few centimetres of room. Most of my money had gone on buying the swanky riverside apartment for me and Star in London. I'd thought that a proper home was what she'd wanted, that it would make her happy, but it so hadn't . . .

Now here I was, no further on than this time last year when I'd sat next to my sister in economy class, flying across the world to Thailand. Except this time Star wasn't with me, and I wasn't running *to* something, I was running away . . .

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‘Would you like breakfast, madam?’

I opened my eyes, feeling groggy and disorientated, and stared up at the same stewardess who had visited me in the middle of the night. I saw that all the cabin lights were on and some of the window blinds were open, revealing the pink hue of dawn.

‘No thanks, just coffee. Black, please.’

She nodded and retreated, and I wondered why – given I was paying for this entire experience – I felt guilty about asking for anything.

‘Where are you headed?’

I turned to face my neighbour, whom I’d only viewed in profile up until now. And even then, it had been a nose, a mouth and a lock of blond hair hanging out of a black hood. Now he was full-frontal, staring at me. He was probably no more than eighteen, the traces of adolescent acne still visible on his chin and forehead. I felt like a pensioner next to him.

‘Bangkok, then on to Australia.’

‘Cool,’ he commented as he tucked into his prison-issue tray of inedible scrambled eggs, over-fried bacon and a long pink thing that was masquerading as a sausage. ‘I’ll head there eventually, but I’m gonna check out Thailand first. I’ve been told the Full Moon Parties are something else.’

‘They are.’

‘You been?’

‘A few times,’ I replied, his question immediately down-loading a selection of memories in my mind.

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‘Which one do you suggest? Heard Ko Pha Ngan is the best.’

‘It’s been ages since I went there last, but I hear it’s huge now – maybe a couple of thousand people. My favourite place is Railay Beach in Krabi. It’s very chilled, but I suppose it depends on what you want.’

‘Heard of Krabi,’ he said, his jaw working overtime to chew the sausage. ‘I’m meeting my mates in Bangkok. We’ve still got a couple of weeks until the full moon to decide anyway. You meeting friends out in Oz?’

‘Yeah,’ I lied.

‘Stopping over in Bangkok for a while?’

‘Just the night.’

I sensed his excitement as the plane began its descent into Suvarnabhumi airport, and the usual set of instructions was issued by the cabin staff for us captives. *It’s all a joke, really*, I thought as I closed my eyes and tried to still my banging heart. If the plane crashed, we would all die instantly, whether or not my tray table was in the upright position. I supposed they had to say this stuff to make us feel better.

The plane touched down so gently I hardly knew we were on the ground until they announced it over the tannoy. I opened my eyes and felt a surge of triumph. I’d completed a long-haul flight alone and lived to tell the tale. Star would be proud of me . . . if she even cared any longer.

Having gone through immigration, I collected my baggage from the carousel and trooped towards the exit.

‘Have a great time in Oz,’ called my teenage neighbour as he caught up with me. ‘My mate says the wildlife there is *insane*, spiders the size of dinner plates! See ya!’

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With a wave, he disappeared into the mass of humanity. I followed him outside at a much slower pace and a familiar wall of humid heat hit me. I caught the airport shuttle bus to the hotel I'd booked into for my overnight stop, checked in, and took the lift up to my sterile room. Heaving my rucksack off my shoulders, I sat on the white bed sheets and thought that if I owned a hotel, I'd provide my guests with dark sheets that didn't show the stains of other bodies on them the way white does, no matter how hard you scrub.

There were so many things in the world that puzzled me, rules that had been made by someone somewhere, probably a long time ago. I took off my hiking boots and lay down, thinking I could be anywhere in the world, and I hated it. The air con unit hummed above me and I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but all I could think about was that if I died right now, not a single human being would know I had.

I understood then what loneliness really was. It felt like a gnawing inside me, yet at the same time, a great hole of emptiness. I blinked away tears – I'd never been a crier – but they kept coming, so that eventually my eyelids were forced to open with the pressure of what felt like a dam about to burst.

*It's okay to cry, CeCe, really . . .*

I heard Ma's comforting voice in my head and remembered her telling me that when I fell out of a tree at Atlantis and sprained my ankle. I'd bitten my bottom lip so hard in my effort not to be a cry-baby that I'd drawn blood.

'She'd care,' I murmured hopelessly, then reached for my mobile and thought about turning it on and texting Ma to tell her where I was. But I couldn't hack seeing a message from Star, or, even worse, seeing no message from her at all. I knew *that* would break me, so I threw the phone across the bed and

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tried to close my eyes again. But then an image of Pa appeared behind my eyelids and wouldn't go away.

*It's important that you and Star make your own friends, as well as having each other, CeCe . . .*

He'd said that just before we'd gone to Sussex University together, and I'd been cross because I didn't *need* anyone else, and neither did Star. Or at least, I hadn't thought she did. Then . . .

'Oh Pa,' I sighed, 'is it better up there?'

In the past few weeks, as Star had made it clear she wasn't interested in being with me any more, I'd found myself talking to Pa a lot. His death just didn't seem real; I still felt him close to me, somehow. Even though outwardly I couldn't be more opposite to Tiggy, my next sister down, with all her weird spiritual beliefs, there was this odd part of me that knew and felt things too . . . in my gut *and* in my dreams. Often it felt like my dreamtime was more real and vivid than when I was awake – a bit like watching a series on TV. Those were the good nights, because I had nightmares too. Like the ones with the enormous spiders . . .

I shuddered, remembering my teenage plane companion's parting words . . . They couldn't really be the size of dinner plates in Australia, could they?

'Christ!' I jumped out of bed to halt my thoughts, and washed my face in the bathroom. I looked at my reflection and, with my eyes pink and swollen from crying and my hair slick with grease after the long journey, I decided I looked like a baby wild boar.

It didn't matter how many times Ma had told me how beautiful and unusual the shape and colour of my eyes were, or Star had said how much she liked to stroke my skin, which

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was – in her words – as smooth and soft as cocoa butter. I knew they were just being kind, because I wasn't blind as well as ugly – and I hated being patronised about my looks. Given I had five beautiful sisters, I'd gone out of my way not to compete with them. Electra – who just happened to be a supermodel – was constantly telling me that I wasn't making the best of myself but it was a waste of time and energy, because I was never going to *be* beautiful.

However, I *could* create beauty, and now, at my lowest ebb, I remembered something else that Pa had once said to me when I was younger.

*Whatever happens to you in life, darling CeCe, the one thing that can never be taken away from you is your talent.*

At the time, I thought it was just another – what was the word Star would use? – *platitude* to make up for the fact that I was basically crap looks-wise, crap academically and crap with people. And actually, Pa was wrong, because even if other people couldn't take talent away from you, they could destroy your confidence with their negative comments and mess with your brain, so you didn't know who you were any more or how to please anyone, least of all yourself. That was what had happened to me on my art course. Which was why I'd left.

*At least I learnt what I wasn't good at,* I comforted myself. Which, according to my tutors, was most of the modules I'd taken in the past three months.

Despite the battering my paintings and I had received, even I knew that if I lost faith in my talent now, then there wasn't any point in carrying on. It really was all I had left.

I went back into the bedroom and lay down again, just wanting these awful lonely hours to pass, and finally under-

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standing why I saw so many old people sitting on benches whenever I'd walked through Battersea Park on my way to college. Even if it was freezing outside, they needed to confirm that there were other human beings on the planet, and that they weren't completely alone.

I must have fallen asleep, because I had the spider nightmare and woke myself up screaming, automatically clapping a hand to my mouth to shut myself up in case someone along the corridor thought I was being murdered. I decided I just couldn't stay in this soulless room any longer by myself, so I put on my boots, grabbed my camera and took the lift down to reception.

Outside, there was a queue of waiting taxis. I climbed into the back of one and directed the driver to the Grand Palace. It had always amused and upset me in equal measure that Bangkok, and what I'd seen of Thailand in general, seemed to be completely overstaffed. In any shop, even if you just went in for a packet of peanuts, there was always one person to guide you round, then another to work the till and a third to bag your purchase. Labour was so cheap here, it was a joke. I immediately felt bad for thinking that, then reminded myself that this was why I loved travelling: it put things into perspective.

The driver dropped me at the Grand Palace and I followed the hordes of tourists, many of them bearing telltale red shoulders that spoke of a recent arrival from colder climates. Outside the temple, I removed my hiking boots and placed them with the variety of flip-flops and trainers other visitors had left by the steps, then walked inside. The Emerald Buddha was supposed to be over five hundred years old and was the most famous statue in Thailand. Yet he was small compared

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to the many other Buddhas I'd seen. The brightness of the jade and the way his body was shaped reminded me of a bright green lizard. His limbs were fluid and, to be honest, not very accurate. Not that it mattered – 'he' was a beautiful thing.

I sat down cross-legged on one of the mats, enjoying my time out of the sun in this big, peaceful space with other human beings around me, probably contemplating their navels too. I'd never been one for religion, but if I had to pick one, I liked Buddhism best because it seemed to be all about the power of nature, which I felt was a permanent miracle happening right in front of my eyes.

Star often said that I should sign up to become a member of the Green Party when she'd listen to me rant on for ages after watching some TV programme on the environment, but what would be the point? My voice didn't count, and I was too stupid to be taken seriously. All I knew was that the plants, animals and oceans that made up our ecosystem and sustained us were so often ignored.

'If I worship anything, it's that,' I murmured to the Buddha. He too was made of earth – of hewn mineral turned to beauty over millennia – and I thought he'd probably understand.

Given this was a temple, I thought I should put in a word to Pa Salt. Maybe churches and temples were rather like telephone exchanges or internet cafés: they gave you a clearer line up to the heavens . . .

'Hi, Pa, really sorry that you died. I miss you much more than I thought I would. And I'm sorry if I didn't listen to you when you gave me advice, and all your words of wisdom and stuff. I should have done because look how I've ended up. Hope you're okay up there,' I added. 'Sorry again.'

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I stood up, feeling the uncomfortable lump of tears threatening the back of my throat, and walked towards the door. As I was about to step outside, I turned back.

‘Help me, Pa, please,’ I whispered to him.

Having bought a bottle of water from a street vendor, I wandered down to the Chao Phraya River and stood watching the heavy traffic chugging along it. Tugs, speedboats and wide barges covered with black tarpaulin continued about their daily business. I decided to get on a passenger ferry and go for a ride – it was cheap and at least better than sitting in my miserable hotel room back at the airport.

As we sped along, I saw glass skyscrapers with golden temples nestled elegantly between them, and along the riverbanks, rickety jetties connected wooden houses to the stream of activity on the water. I took my trusty Nikon camera – Pa had given it to me on my sixteenth birthday, so that I could, as he’d put it, ‘take pictures of what inspires you, darling’ – and snapped away. Star was always nagging me to move to digital photography, but me and technology didn’t get on, so I stuck to what I knew.

After getting off the boat just past the Oriental Hotel, I walked up the street beside it and remembered how I’d once treated Star to high tea in the famous Authors’ Lounge. We’d both felt out of place in our jeans and T-shirts, with everyone else dressed up to the nines. Star had spent hours in the library looking at the signed photographs of all the authors who had stayed at the hotel in the past. I wondered if she ever *would* write her novel, because she was so good at putting sentences together and describing things on paper. Not that it was any of my business any more. She had a new family now; I’d seen a light in her eyes when I’d arrived home a few weeks

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ago and a man she called 'Mouse' had been there in our apartment, gazing at her like an adoring puppy.

I sat down at a street café and ordered a bowl of noodles and a beer just for the hell of it. I wasn't good with alcohol, but given I was feeling so awful, it couldn't really make me feel much worse. As I ate, I thought that what hurt the most wasn't the fact that Star had a new boyfriend and job, it was that she'd withdrawn from me, slowly and painfully. Perhaps she thought I'd be jealous, that I wanted her all to myself, which just wasn't true. I loved her more than anything, and only wanted to see her happy. I'd never been so stupid as to think that one day, what with her being so beautiful and clever, a man wouldn't come along.

*You were really rude to him when he came to the apartment,* my conscience reminded me. And yes, I *had* minded him being there, and, as usual, I hadn't known how to hide it.

The beer did its job and blunted the sharp edges of my pain. I paid, then stood up and walked aimlessly along the road before turning into a narrow alley that had a street market. A few stalls down, I came across an artist painting a watercolour. Watching him sitting at his easel reminded me of the nights I'd sat on Railay Beach in Krabi with my sketch pad and tin of paints, trying to capture the beauty of the sunset. Closing my eyes, I remembered the peace I'd felt when I'd been there with Star, only a year ago. I wanted it back so much it hurt.

I made my way to the riverbank and leant over the balustrade, thinking. Would it be turning chicken to head for the place I'd felt happiest before going on to Australia? I knew people on Railay Beach. They'd recognise me, wave and say hello. Most of them were escaping from something too,

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because Railay was that kind of place. Besides, the only reason I was going to Australia was because of what Georg Hoffman, Pa's lawyer, had told me when I'd been to see him. It was somewhere to head to, far away from London.

So, instead of spending twelve hours flying in a tube to a place where I knew no one, I could be drinking a cold beer on Railay Beach by this time tomorrow night. Surely a couple of weeks or so wouldn't hurt? After all, it was Christmas soon and it might be less awful to spend it in a place that I knew and loved . . .

It was the first time in ages that I'd actually felt anticipation at the thought of doing something. Before the feeling vanished, I hailed the first taxi I saw and directed it back to the airport. Inside the terminal, I went to the Thai Airways ticket desk and explained that I needed to delay my flight to Australia. The woman at the desk did a lot of tapping on her computer and told me it would cost about four thousand baht, which wasn't much in the scheme of things.

'You have flexible ticket. What date you wish to rebook?' she asked.

'Er, maybe for just after Christmas?'

'Everything full. First available flight is eighth of January.'

'Okay,' I agreed, glad I could now blame fate for having to stay on longer. Then I booked a return flight from Bangkok to Krabi, leaving early the following morning.

Back in my hotel room, I took a shower, brushed my teeth and climbed into bed feeling calmer. If my sisters heard, I knew they would all say that I was 'bumming around' again, but I didn't care.

Like an injured animal, I was going away to hide and lick my wounds.

## 2

The best thing about Railay Beach is that it's on a peninsula and you can only reach it by boat. Star and I had travelled to many incredible places, but sitting on a wooden bench in a long-tail boat speeding noisily across an aquamarine sea, and that first sight of the incredible limestone pillars rising into a deep blue sky, had to be up there in my top five magical moments.

As we drew closer, I saw ropes attached to the rock, with humans who looked like multicoloured ants dressed in bright fluorescent shorts scaling its surface. As I heaved my rucksack onto my shoulders and clambered off the boat, my skin prickled in anticipation. Although my limbs were short, they were strong and agile, and rock climbing was one of the things I was actually good at. Not a useful skill for someone who lived in the centre of London and wanted to be an artist, but in a place like this, it meant something. I thought about how, depending where you were on the earth, your particular strengths and weaknesses were either positives or negatives. In school I was a dunce, whereas Star was, *literally*, a superstar. Yet here in Krabi, she'd faded into the shadows and sat on the beach with a book, while I'd revelled in all the outdoor

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activities the area had to offer. The great outdoors *was* my element, as Ma had once commented, and I had been more well known in the community here than Star.

The colour of the water around me was unique: turquoise one moment as the sun glinted on it, then a deep green in the sheltered shadows beneath the huge rocks. As I waded onto land through the shallows, I saw the beach spread out in front of me: a gentle crescent of white sand edged by the enormous limestone pillars, with palm trees dotted intermittently between the basic wooden shacks that housed the hotels and bars. The calming sound of reggae music emanated from one of them.

I trudged across the burning white sand towards the Railay Beach Hotel, where we'd stayed last year, and leant on the bar-cum-reception tucked inside the wooden veranda.

'Hi,' I said to a young Thai woman I didn't recognise. 'Do you have a room available for the next few weeks?'

The woman studied me and got out a large reservations folder. She traced her finger carefully down each page, then shook her head.

'Christmas coming. Very busy. No room after twenty-first.'

'Just the next two weeks then?' I suggested.

I felt a hand suddenly slap my back.

'Cee? It is you, isn't it?'

I turned round and saw Jack, an Australian bundle of tall, toned muscle, who owned the hotel and ran the rock-climbing school on the beach round the corner.

'Yeah, hi.' I grinned at him. 'I'm just checking in, at least for a couple of weeks, anyway, then I get kicked out. Apparently you're fully booked.'

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'Sure we can find you a cupboard somewhere, darl, don't worry about that. Your sister here with you?'

'Er, no. Just me this time.'

'How long are you staying?'

'Until after New Year.'

'Well, if you want to give me a hand at the rock, let me know. I could do with it, Cee. Business goes mad this time of year.'

'I might. Thanks,' I said.

'You fill out details.' The Thai receptionist handed me a card.

'Don't worry about that, Nam,' Jack told her. 'Cee was here with her sister last year so we have them already. Come on. I'll show you to your room.'

'Thanks.'

As Jack picked up my rucksack, I saw the receptionist giving me the evils.

'Where are you headed after here?' he asked companionably as he led me along a wooden walkway, off which a series of basic rooms lay behind a row of battered doors.

'Australia,' I replied as we stood in front of room twenty-two, at the end of the walkway. I saw it was slap bang next door to the generator, with a view of two big wheelie bins.

'Ah, my home country. Which part?'

'The northwest coast.'

'Blistering this time of year, y'know.'

'The heat doesn't bother me,' I said as I unlocked my door.

'Well, see ya around.' Jack gave me a wave and ambled off.

Even though the room was tiny, humid and smelt strongly of rubbish, I dumped my rucksack on the floor, feeling more

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chipper than I had in weeks, because it felt so good to be known. I'd loved my occasional days working at the rock-climbing school last year, checking the ropes and fastening clients into their harnesses. At the time, Star and I had been short of cash and Jack had knocked some money off our room in return. I wondered what he'd say if I told him I didn't need to work any more, because I was now a millionairess. On paper, anyway . . .

I tugged on a frayed piece of cord to switch on the ceiling fan, and eventually, with a lot of clanking and squeaking, it began to turn, stirring up only a whisper of breeze. Discarding my clothes, I put on my bikini and a sarong I'd bought here last year, then left my room and wandered down to the beach. I sat on the sand for a bit, chuckling at the fact that here in 'paradise', what with all the long-tail boats motoring in and out of the bay, it was a million times noisier than living on the river in the centre of London. I stood up, walked down to the shore and waded into the sea. When I was far enough out, I lay on my back in the gorgeous water, looked up at the sky and thanked God, or Buddha, or whomever I was meant to thank, that I'd come back to Krabi. I felt at home for the first time in months.



I slept on the beach that night, as I'd often done in the past, with only a kaftan, a hoody and my blow-up pillow for comfort. Star had thought I was nuts – 'You'll get bitten to death by mosquitoes,' she'd commented whenever I'd trailed out of the room with my bedding. But somehow, with the moon and stars shining down on me, I felt more protected by

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the roof of the world than I would have done by anything man-made.

I was woken by a tickling on my face, and lifted my head to see a large pair of male feet marching past me towards the sea. Brushing away the sand they'd shed onto me, I saw that the beach was otherwise deserted, and by the look of the light beginning to spread across the horizon, it was just before dawn. Grumpy at being woken so early, I watched as the man – who had a beard and black hair scraped back in a ponytail that straggled out of the back of his baseball cap – reached the shore and sat down, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms folded around them. I turned over to try to get back to sleep – I got my best rest between four and ten a.m. – but my body and mind weren't interested. So I sat up, assumed the same position as the man in front of me, and watched the sunrise with him.

Given the amount of exotic places I'd visited, I'd actually seen relatively few sunrises in my life, because it wasn't my time of day. The magnificent, subtle hues of dawn breaking reminded me of a Turner painting, but far better in real life.

Once the sun's performance was over, the man immediately stood up and walked away along the beach. I heard the faint chug of a long-tail boat in the distance, heralding the start of the human day. I stood up, deciding to retreat to my room to get some more sleep before the beach filled with outgoing and incoming passengers. *Still*, I thought, as I unlocked the door and lay down on my bed, *it had been worth being woken up to see that.*



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Just as it always seemed to here, time slipped past without me really noticing. I'd agreed to Jack's offer of helping him out at the rock-climbing school. I also went scuba diving, swimming alongside seahorses, tiger fish and black-tipped reef sharks who barely spared me a glance as they cruised through the corals.

Sunsets were spent chatting on mats on the beach, with the sound of Bob Marley in the background. I was pleasantly surprised by how many Railay residents remembered me from last year, and it was only when darkness fell and they were hanging out at the bar intent on getting drunk that I'd head back to my room. It didn't feel too bad, though, because I was leaving them, not the other way around, and I could always go back and join them if I wanted to.

One thing that had really cheered me up was when I'd finally had the courage to turn on my mobile a day after I'd arrived, and I'd seen that Star had left me loads of texts saying things like, **Where are you?**, **I'm so worried about you!** and **Please call me!** There had also been a lot of voicemails from her, which mostly said that she was sorry over and over again. It had taken me a while to send a reply – not just because I was dyslexic, or because the predictive text function on my phone was even more hopeless at spelling than me, but because I didn't know what to say.

In the end, I just said that I was fine, and apologised for not getting in touch sooner, because I'd been in transit. Which I had, from all sorts of stuff. She texted back immediately, saying how relieved she was that I was okay, and asking me where I was, and saying that she was sorry, again. Something stopped me from telling her my location. It was childish, but it was the only secret I had to keep. And she'd kept a lot from me lately.

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I only realised I'd been in Railay for two weeks when Nam, the young Thai woman on the reception desk, who acted as though she owned the place, reminded me I had to check out today at noon.

'Bugger,' I said under my breath as I walked away, realising I'd have to spend the morning room-hunting.

I arrived back at the hotel a couple of hours later, having fruitlessly traipsed the length and breadth of Railay Beach in search of a bed for the night – like Mary on her donkey – to find Nam glaring at me again.

'Maid need to clean room. New guest arrive at two p.m.'

'I'm on my way,' I said, wanting to tell her that actually, I could easily afford to book in at the five-star Rayavadee Hotel. *If they actually had a room, which they didn't, because I'd already checked.* I stuffed everything into my rucksack, then dropped off the key to my room. *I'll just have to sleep under the stars for a few days until Christmas is over,* I thought.

Later that evening, having eaten my bowl of pad thai, I saw Jack propping up the bar. He had an arm around Nam, which immediately explained her bad attitude towards me.

'You found a room?' Jack asked me.

'No, not yet, but I'm fine sleeping on the beach for tonight.'

'Listen, Cee, take mine, no worries at all. I'm sure I can find a bed for a few nights elsewhere.' He nuzzled into Nam's smug little shoulder.

'Okay, thanks, Jack,' I agreed swiftly, having spent the

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afternoon guarding my rucksack on the beach like it was the Holy Grail, and wondering how I could take a shower to wash the sand and salt off my skin. Even *I* needed the basics.

He dug in his pocket for the key and handed it to me, as Nam looked at me with disapproval. Following his directions up a flight of narrow stairs that led from reception, I opened the door and, apart from the smell of sweaty socks laced with a hint of damp towels, I was quite impressed – Jack had the best view in the building. And even better than that, a narrow wooden balcony, built out over the roof of the veranda below.

Locking the door, in case a drunk Jack forgot he'd loaned me his room, I took a shower, which had a far bigger and more powerful nozzle than the dribbles in the guest rooms below me. I put on a clean T-shirt and shorts and went to sit out on the balcony.

Close to Orion's Belt, I saw the Seven Sisters stars clustered together. When Pa had first shown me my star through his telescope, he had seen that I was disappointed. It was the least bright, which just about said it all, and my mythological story seemed vague at best. Being so young, I'd wanted to be the shiniest, biggest star with the best story of all.

*CeCe*, he'd said, taking my small hands in his. *You're here on earth to write your own story. And I know you will.*

As I stared at the star cluster, I thought of the letter Pa had written to me, which was given to me by Georg Hoffman, his lawyer, a few days after Pa had died.

Star had refused to open hers, but I'd been desperate to read mine. So I'd taken myself off into the garden and climbed into the branches of a magnificent old beech tree – the same tree I'd once fallen out of when I was small. I'd always felt safe up there, protected from view by its leafy

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branches. I'd often gone there to think, or to sulk, depending on the situation. Making myself comfortable on the wide bough, I'd torn open the letter.

*Atlantis  
Lake Geneva  
Switzerland*

*My darling CeCe,*

*I know reading this letter will be a struggle for you. I beg you to have the patience to finish it. I'll also guess that you will read this without crying, because emotion is a land you keep inside. Yet I'm fully aware of how deeply you feel.*

*I am certain you will have been strong for Star. You arrived at Atlantis within six months of each other and the way you have always protected her has been a beautiful sight to witness. You love deeply and fiercely, as I have always done. A word of advice from one who knows: take care that this is not to the detriment of yourself. Don't be afraid of letting go when the time comes – the bond you share with your sister is deep and unbreakable. Trust in it.*

*As you will already have seen, I have left you girls an armillary sphere in my special garden. Under each of your names is a set of coordinates that will tell you exactly where I found you. There is also a quotation, which I hope you feel is apt. I certainly do.*

*In addition, I urge you to go and see my dear friend and lawyer Georg Hoffman as soon as you can. Don't worry, what he has to tell you is very good news, and in*

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*itself provides a link with your past that will be enough to send you on your way if you want to find out more about your birth family. If you do take the leap, I'd advise you to find out more about a woman called Kitty Mercer, who lived in Broome on the northwestern coast of Australia. It was she who began your story.*

*I realise that you have often felt overshadowed by your sisters. It is vital that you don't lose faith in yourself. Your talent as an artist is unique – you paint as your imagination demands. And once you have found the confidence to trust in it, I am sure you will fly.*

*Lastly, I want to tell you how much I love you, my strong, determined adventurer. Never stop searching, CeCe, for both inspiration and peace, which I pray will come to you eventually.*

*Pa Salt x*

Pa had been right about one thing – it had taken me almost an hour to read the letter and decipher every single word. Yet he was wrong about something else – I had almost cried. I'd sat up in that tree for a long time, until I'd realised that my backside was numb, and my legs had got pins and needles, so I'd had to climb down.

*By the grace of God, I am who I am*, had been the quotation he'd had engraved onto the armillary sphere. Given that – both then and now – I actually had no *idea* who I was, it hadn't inspired me, only depressed me further.

When I'd been to see Georg Hoffman in his Geneva office the next morning, he'd said that Star couldn't come in with me, so she'd had to wait outside in reception. He'd then told me about my inheritance and handed me an envelope

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containing a black and white photograph of an older man standing with a teenage boy by a pickup truck.

‘Am I meant to know them?’ I’d asked Georg.

‘I’m afraid I have no idea, Celaeno. That was the only thing that arrived with the funds. There was no note, just the address of the solicitor who wired the money from Australia.’

I’d been planning to show the photograph to Star to see if she had any ideas, but in order to encourage her to open her own letter from Pa, I’d resolved that I wouldn’t tell her what Georg Hoffman had said until she did. When she *had* eventually opened hers, she hadn’t told me what it said, so she still didn’t know about the photograph, or where the money to buy the London apartment had actually come from.

*You used to tell me everything . . .*

I rested my chin on my hands and leant over the balcony, hit again by a big dose of the ‘miseries’, as Star and I used to call it when we felt low. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a solitary figure standing at the water’s edge near the rocks, staring up at the moon. It was the guy from a couple of weeks ago who’d woken me up on the beach. As I hadn’t seen him since, and because Railay was such a small community, I’d presumed he’d left. But here he was, alone again in the dark of night. Maybe he didn’t want to be seen . . .

I watched him for a while to see where he went, but he didn’t move for ages, and I got bored, so I went inside and lay down on the bed to try and sleep. Whoever he was, I just *knew* he was as lonely as me.

## 3

On Christmas Eve – which just happened to be a full moon to boot – I automatically did what Star and I used to do every year with our sisters, and looked up into the night sky to search for the bright, magical star that Pa always told us was the Star of Bethlehem. I'd once googled the star he'd pointed to and, with Ally's help, discovered that it was in fact the North Star – Polaris. In Switzerland, it was high in the sky all year round, but tonight I couldn't even find it. Then I remembered that Google also said it was harder to see the further south you went. I gazed heavenward and thought how sad it was that we weren't kids any more, and that we could discover the truth by pressing a few keys on a computer.

But tonight, I decided, I *would* believe in magic. I fixed my gaze on the brightest star I could find and thought of Atlantis. Besides, even if Christmas wasn't celebrated in Buddhist culture, Thailand still made an attempt for its international guests by hanging up tinsel and foil banners, which at least put everyone in a good mood.

Just before midnight, I wandered out of the noisy bar and walked down towards the rocks to get the best view of the full moon. And there, already standing in the shadows, was

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the mystery man – once again in the dark, and once again alone. I felt really irritated because I wanted this moment to be special and to have the space to myself, so I turned tail and walked away from him. Then, when I was far enough away, I looked up and spoke to my sister.

‘Merry Christmas, Star. Hope it’s a good one, and that you’re well and comfortable. I miss you,’ I whispered to the sky. I sent up a little wish to Pa, and then Ma too, who probably missed Pa just as much as any of us. After that, I sent up a kiss to all of my sisters – even Electra, who didn’t really deserve a kiss because she was so selfish and mean and spoilt . . . But it was Christmas, after all. I turned back, my legs feeling a bit wobbly beneath me, due to the extra beer that had been pressed into my hand at the bar earlier.

As I was passing the mystery man, I stumbled slightly and a pair of hands reached out to the top of my arms to steady me. ‘Thanks,’ I muttered. ‘There was an, er . . . rock in the sand.’

‘That’s okay.’

As his hands left my arms, I looked up at him. He’d obviously been in for a swim as his long black hair had been released from its ponytail and hung wet about his shoulders. He had what Star and I had nicknamed a chest beard – although it wasn’t a very impressive one – and the line of black hairs travelling from his navel to his shorts formed a shadow in the moonlight. His legs looked quite hairy too.

My eyes travelled back up to his face and I saw that his cheekbones stood out like saws above his dark beard, which made his lips seem very full and pink in comparison. When I actually dared to look him in the eyes, I saw that they were a really amazing blue.

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I decided he reminded me of a werewolf. After all, tonight was a full moon. He was so skinny and tall that I felt like a plump pygmy next to him.

‘Merry Christmas,’ he mumbled.

‘Yeah, merry Christmas.’

‘I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?’ he said. ‘You were the girl lying asleep that morning on the beach.’

‘Probably. I’m there a lot.’ I shrugged casually as his weird blue eyes swept over me.

‘Don’t you have a room?’

‘Yeah, but I like sleeping outside.’

‘All those stars, the vastness of the universe . . . it puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?’ He sighed heavily.

‘It does. Where are you staying?’

‘Nearby.’ The Werewolf waved his hand vaguely at the rock behind him. ‘You?’

‘There.’ I pointed back towards the Railay Beach Hotel. ‘Or at least, my rucksack is,’ I added. ‘Bye then.’ I turned towards the hotel, doing my best to try and walk in a straight line, which was hard enough on sand, but with two beers inside me, almost impossible. I could feel the Werewolf’s eyes upon me as I reached the veranda and allowed myself a quick backwards glance. He was *still* staring at me, so I grabbed a couple of bottles of water from the fridge and scurried upstairs to Jack’s room. After fumbling to unlock the door, I crept onto the balcony to try and spot him, but he’d disappeared into the shadows.

Perhaps he was waiting for me to go to sleep, and then numb my senses by sticking two enormous fangs into my neck so I wouldn’t scream as he sucked my blood dry . . .

*CeCe, that’s vampires, not werewolves,* I told myself with

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a giggle, then hiccuped and drank a bottle of water straight down, irritated with myself and my pathetic body for not being able to cope with two small beers. I staggered to the bed, feeling my head spin when I closed my eyes, and eventually passed out into oblivion.



Christmas Day was painfully similar to last year here with Star. The tables on the veranda had all been pushed together, and a parody of a roast lunch had been laid out, as if it was possible to recreate the essence of Christmas in thirty-four-degree heat.

After lunch, feeling bloated from the stodgy European food, I took a swim to work the feeling off. It was almost three o'clock, around the time that England would be waking up. Star was probably spending it in Kent with her new family. I emerged from the sea and shook the water droplets off me like a dog. There were lots of couples lying lazily together on the beach, sleeping off their lunches. It was the first Christmas in twenty-seven years that Star and I had spent apart. Well, if the mystery man was a werewolf, then I was a lone wolf now, and I just had to get used to it.

Later on that evening, I was sitting on the corner of the veranda, listening to music through my iPod. It was of the crashing, banging variety, which always cheered me up when I was feeling low. I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned round to see Jack standing beside me.

'Hi there,' I said, taking my earphones out.

'Hi. Can I buy you a beer?'

'No thanks. Had enough last night.' I rolled my eyes at

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him, knowing he'd been far too drunk to notice what I'd had.

'Sure. Look, Cee, the thing is that, well . . .' He pulled up a chair and sat next to me. 'Nam and I have . . . fallen out. Can't remember what I did wrong, but she kicked me out of bed at four this morning. She didn't even turn up today to help with the Christmas lunch, so I don't think I'll get a warm welcome back tonight. You know what women are like.'

*Yeah, I am one, remember?* I felt like saying, but didn't.

'So, the problem is, I've got nowhere to kip. D'you mind sharing the bed with me?'

*Yes, I do mind!* I thought immediately. 'Really, Jack, as long as I can leave my rucksack in your room, I'm happy to sleep on the beach,' I assured him.

'Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

'Sorry, Cee, I'm completely knackered after all the preparations for Christmas and the extra work over the last few days.'

'It's fine. I'll just go and get what I need and leave you to it.'

'I'm sure we'll be able to find you somewhere tomorrow,' he called to me as I walked away, feeling the beach was a much better option than sleeping in the same room as a snoring man I hardly knew. Now that *would* give me nightmares.

I collected my makeshift bedding, then stuffed the rest of my possessions into my rucksack. Tomorrow, I really needed to find myself a place to stay until I left for Australia in two weeks' time.

On the beach, I made my bed under a bush and, on a whim, I dug my mobile out of my shorts and dialled Atlantis.

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‘Hello?’ The phone was picked up after a couple of rings.

‘Hi, Ma, it’s CeCe. I just wanted to wish you and Claudia a happy Christmas.’

‘CeCe! I am so happy to hear from you! Star said you’d gone away. Where are you?’

Ma always spoke to us sisters in French and I had to adjust my brain before I could answer her. ‘Oh, you know me, Ma, on a beach, doing my thing.’

‘Yes. I didn’t think you’d last long in London.’

‘Didn’t you?’

‘You’re a free spirit, *chérie*. You have wanderlust.’

‘Yes, I do.’ At that moment, I loved Ma just about as much as I’d ever loved her. She never judged or criticised, just supported her girls.

I heard the sound of a deep male cough in the background and my ears pricked up.

‘Who’s there with you?’ I asked suspiciously.

‘Just Claudia and Christian,’ said Ma.

In other words, the Atlantis staff.

‘Right. You know, Ma, it was really weird, but when I got to the airport in London three weeks ago, I’m sure I saw Pa. He was walking back the other way and I tried to run and catch him, but he’d gone. I know this sounds stupid, but, like, I was sure it was him.’

‘Oh *chérie*,’ I heard Ma sigh deeply down the line. ‘You are not the first of your sisters to say something like this to me. Both Ally and Star told me that they were convinced they had heard or seen him . . . and perhaps you all did. But not in reality. Or at least, not reality as we know it.’

‘You think we’re all seeing and hearing the ghost of Pa?’ I chuckled.

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‘I think we wish to *believe* we are still seeing him, so perhaps our imaginations conjure him up. I see him all the time here,’ Ma said, suddenly sounding very sad. ‘And this is such a difficult time of year for us all. You are well, CeCe?’

‘You know me, Ma, never had a day’s illness in my life.’

‘And happy?’

‘I’m fine. You?’

‘I’m missing your father, of course, and all you girls. Claudia sends her love.’

‘Same to her. Okay, Ma, it’s late here, I’m getting my head down now.’

‘Keep in touch, won’t you, CeCe?’

‘Yeah, course I will. Night.’

‘Goodnight, *chérie*. And *joyeux Noël*.’

I tucked my mobile back into my shorts, then put my arms around my knees and rested my head on them, thinking how hard this Christmas must be for her. Us girls could move on to a future – or at least, we could *try*. We had more life ahead of us than we’d already lived, but Ma had given hers to us girls and Pa. I wondered then if she’d actually loved my father in a ‘romantic’ way, and decided she must have done to stay on for all those years and make our family *her* family. And now we had all left her.

I then wondered if my real mum had ever missed me or thought of me, and why she’d given me to Pa. Maybe she’d dumped me in an orphanage somewhere, and he’d collected me from there because he’d felt sorry for me. I was sure I’d been a very ugly baby.

All the answers lay in Australia, another twelve hours’ journey from here. It was beyond weird that it was one country in the world I’d refused point-blank to visit, even though

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Star had quite fancied going. Pathetic that my spider nightmare was the reason, but there it was.

*Well*, I thought as I settled myself down on the sand, *Pa had called me 'strong' and an 'adventurer'*. I knew I'd need every ounce of those qualities to get me onto that plane in two weeks' time.



Again, I was woken by tickling across my face. I brushed the sand away and sat up to see the Werewolf walking to the sea. Wondering briefly how many maidens he'd eaten in the past few hours, I watched his long legs make short work of the sand.

He sat down at the water's edge in the same position as last time, with me directly behind him. We both looked up, waiting for the show to begin, like we were in a cinema. *A cinema of the universe . . .* I liked that phrase, and felt proud of myself for thinking of it. Maybe Star could use it in her novel one day.

The show was spectacular, made even more epic by the fact that there were a few clouds around today, softening the rising sun as it seeped like a golden yolk into the whipped egg whites around it.

'Hi,' the Werewolf said to me as he was walking back.

'Hi.'

'Good one this morning, wasn't it?' he offered.

'Yeah, great.'

'Don't think you'll be sleeping out here tonight, mind you. We're in for a storm.'

'Yes,' I agreed.

## *The Pearl Sister*

‘Well, see ya around.’ He gave me a wave and wandered off.

Back up on the terrace a few minutes later, I saw Jack was setting up breakfast. Nam normally did this, but she still hadn’t been seen since Christmas Eve.

‘Morning,’ I said.

‘Morning.’ He gave me a guilty look before he said, ‘Sleep well?’

‘Not bad, Jack.’ I beckoned him towards me and pointed to the retreating figure on the beach. ‘Do you know him?’

‘No, but I’ve seen him a coupla times on the beach late at night. Keeps himself to himself. Why?’

‘Just wondered. How long has he been here?’

‘I’d reckon at least a few weeks.’

‘Right. Is it okay if I go up and take a shower in your room?’

‘Sure. See ya later.’

Having showered, I sat on the floor in Jack’s room and sorted through my rucksack. I divided clean and dirty clothes – the dirty pile being the vast majority – and decided I’d drop them off at the laundry on my way to find a room. Then if the worst came to the worst and I ended up outside in a storm tonight, at least I’d have some clean, dry clothes for tomorrow.

Even though there was no such thing as Boxing Day in this part of the world, everyone wandered along the narrow alleyway of shacks that passed for shops, looking as they did in Europe: like they’d over-drunk, over-eaten and were fed up because they’d opened all their presents and the excitement had passed. Even the normally smiley laundry lady looked

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grim as she separated the darks from the whites and shook out my underwear for all to see.

‘Ready tomorrow.’ She handed me the ticket and I trudged out. Hearing a vague rumble of thunder in the distance, I began my hunt for a room.

I walked back onto the hotel veranda later, hot and sweaty and not having found anywhere that could offer me a room until tomorrow lunchtime. I sat drinking a coconut water and ruminating on whether I should move on – go to Ko Phi Phi perhaps, but there was no guarantee that I’d find anything there either. Well, one night out in the rain wouldn’t kill me, and if it got really bad, I could always shelter under one of the restaurant verandas.

‘Found a room yet?’ Jack asked hopefully as he passed me, carrying a tray of beer to the neighbouring table.

‘Yeah,’ I lied, not wanting to put him in a difficult position. ‘I’ll go upstairs and collect my rucksack after lunch.’

‘Don’t fancy giving me a hand behind the bar for a while, do you?’ he asked. ‘What with Nam going AWOL and the hotel full, I haven’t been able to get along to the rock. Abi’s just called to say they’ve got a queue as long as a python down there. And about as angry.’

‘I don’t mind, though I wouldn’t trust me carrying trays,’ I joked.

‘Any port in a storm, Cee. It’ll only be a couple of hours, I swear. Free beer and whatever you want to eat is on the house tonight. Come on, I’ll show you the ropes.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, and stood up to go with him behind the bar.

Four hours later, there was no sign of Jack and I’d had enough. The bar was heaving and there was a rush on juices

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– presumably sparked by people using vitamin C or Bloody Marys as a hangover cure. None of the drinks were as simple as just pinging the cap off a beer, and I'd ended up splattered with mango juice when the blender had exploded all over me because I hadn't screwed the top on properly. The previous high spirits of the customers had disappeared overnight with the wrapping paper, and I was fed up with being shouted at for being slow. On top of that, I could hear the rumble of thunder getting closer, which meant that later, probably when me and my rucksack had to make camp on the beach, the heavens would open.

Jack arrived back eventually, full of apologies for being away for so long. He looked around the now almost empty veranda.

'At least you haven't been too busy. It was heaving down at the rock.'

*Yeah, right . . .* I didn't say anything as I finished my noodles, then went upstairs to collect my rucksack.

'Thanks, Cee. I'll see ya around,' he said as I arrived back downstairs, paid the bill for my room and trudged off.

I walked along the beach as a couple of lightning flashes appeared almost directly above me. I reckoned I had about five minutes before the downpour, so I upped my speed and turned right along an alleyway to a bar I knew, then saw that most of the shack-shops had closed up early because of the impending storm. The bar was also pulling down its shutters as I approached.

'Great,' I muttered as the owner gave me a curt nod, and I carried on. 'This is totally crazy and ridiculous, CeCe,' I groaned. 'Just go back to Jack and tell him you'll share his bed . . .'

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Yet my legs propelled me forwards until I arrived at the beach on the other side of the peninsula. It was called Phra Nang and, aesthetically, it was even more beautiful than Railay. Because of this, it was a huge tourist spot for day-trippers, so I usually avoided it. Also, because the luxury Rayavadee Hotel backed onto it, there were scary security guards placed along its perimeter. Star and I had gone down there one night after the last long-tail boat had chugged off, and lain on our backs looking up at the stars. Five minutes later, a torch had been shone on our faces and we'd been told to leave. I tried to argue that all beaches in Thailand were public and the hotel security guards had no right to kick us off, but Star had shushed me as they'd manhandled us towards the path that led back to the plebs' side of the peninsula.

That sort of thing burned in my soul, because the earth and its beauty had been created by nature to be enjoyed for free by everyone, not reserved for the rich.

As a streak of blue and purple lightning lit up the sky, I realised this wasn't the moment to have a philosophical discussion with myself. Looking along the beach, I had a brainwave. The Cave of the Princess was at the far end of it, so I began to leg it across the sand. Two-thirds of the way along, huge drops of water began to fall on me. It felt like being pelted with small pieces of gravel.

I arrived at the entrance to the cave, staggered inside and threw my rucksack down. I looked up and remembered that for some reason there were actually two versions of the princess, both tiny doll-sized figures who nestled within small wooden temples, half hidden behind hundreds of assorted colourful garlands. On their altar, there were tea lights burn-

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ing, which illuminated the inside of the cave with a comforting yellow glow.

I smiled to myself, recalling the first time that Star and I had visited the cave. Thinking it would be like any other Thai place of worship, we'd both expected a gold statue and the ubiquitous garland offerings. Instead, we'd been confronted by hundreds of phalluses of different shapes and sizes. I surveyed them now, poking upwards from the sandy floor of the cave like erotic stalagmites, and perched on the rocks all around. Red, green, blue, brown . . . small ones, big ones . . . Apparently, this particular deity was a goddess of fertility. And from the size of the instruments that crowded the cave – some of which towered above my own head – I wasn't surprised.

However, tonight the Cave of the Princess was offering me sanctuary and I was out of the rain that was now streaming down like a curtain at the mouth of the cave. I stood up and walked through the selection of tributes, then knelt at the altar to say thank you. After that, I tucked myself into the side of the cave's entrance and watched the storm.

The sky lit up in spectacular flashes as lightning raged over the sea and the jagged limestone pillars. The rain shone silver in the moonlight as it pounded onto the beach in sheets, as if God was crying buckets from up above.

Eventually, feeling wrung out by the spectacle and the sheer energy the universe possessed, I staggered upright. Moving me and my rucksack deeper into the cave, I laid out my bed for the night and fell asleep behind an enormous scarlet phallus.